



# DEMON BAKE

THE DARK TALONS  
BOOK ONE

MARIE ROBINSON

**DEMONBANE**

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## CHAPTER ONE



The new day's sun peeked over the rundown buildings in Constinbul's slums, but the scent of stale beer and refuse had been washed away during the night. The mornings after a heavy rain were my favorite. I could close my eyes and believe, for a few moments, that life had never changed ten years ago. That I was safe in my mother's favorite garden, waiting for the day to begin.

I'd be wearing a chiffon dress instead of coarse wool tunic and trousers, sitting on a chair instead of barrels. Soft slippers instead of worn leather boots that I'd repaired myself more than twice. My hands would be soft instead of callused and scarred. They'd be stained with ink instead of blood.

At least I wasn't married with children hanging on my skirts. It was one of the few things I was thankful for from this new life. Even as a child, I'd found the idea of marriage unappealing. Now, doubly so.

I knew exactly what sort of life I'd have if I married now. I could find a tradesman, maybe help him with his craft, and

start birthing more mouths to feed.

At least on my own, mine was the only mouth there was to feed. No one told me what to do—

“Minerva!”

Maybe the last part wasn’t entirely true.

I opened my eyes, hand going to my dagger from habit.

The man walked towards me; anyone on the street pulled away from him, their eyes down. Durnth owned these streets. He was the head of the Hallows gang. He was a bull of a man, I’d always thought. He needed a pair of horns and a nose ring and the image would be complete. He had that “don’t fuck with me” aura I always tried to channel.

For the most part, I succeeded. When I didn’t, I used the dagger he’d taught me to use.

I’d tried to steal from him, back when I first was on the streets. Rather than chopping my hand off, or killing me, he took me in and made me what I was.

He saved me. I still hated him.

“What’s this job you have lined up?” As much as I tried, I could never sound like I was raised on the streets. Durnth would never sound like a noble, though he dressed like one. He had no fear of flaunting his wealth, wearing a fine suede doublet over his unstained tunic and matching britches. Even his black knee-high boots were polished and clean, as if they feared his wrath for getting mud on them. No amount of gold could stop his hair from thinning, though.

His face had too many scars to pass as a high-class noble, and his smashed and crooked nose had been broken too many times. Expensive clothing would never hide the

fact that Durnth looked like a man who could smash a skull between his hands.

I knew firsthand he could and had.

He settled against the barrels; his arms crossed over his chest as he surveyed the street. He was a king without a crown, and this district his kingdom.

"Client will be here soon. He's needing men to guard a caravan."

"Doesn't sound like my usual duties."

His look made unease fill me. "The job is massive, Min." He was the only one I allowed to call me that. "Big enough that we can move up, expand the Hallows' territory."

Or start over somewhere new. Maybe stop having to steal for a living.

"Why me?"

Durnth didn't answer, straightening as a rider turned onto the street.

If the people had stepped back from Durnth, they fled from this man.

My unease turned to dread.

His horse was a beast black as night, clearly a warhorse where this area only ever saw farm horses at the most. The tack and saddle were as just dark and seemed to drink in the shadows of the buildings. A massive broadsword was sheathed to the horse, within easy reach to be drawn by the rider.

If the horse was a warhorse, his rider was a warlord. The man rode with ease, the reins in one hand, his other resting on his thigh. He didn't wear armor. Instead he wore a black doublet which hung open to reveal a white shirt

underneath, molded to his broad chest. His belt held a dagger, but that was the only weapon I could see on him. The man wasn't barrel-chested like Durnth, though his shoulders were equally as broad as my boss's.

When he dismounted in front of us, I had to tilt my head back to look up at him.

I wasn't a short woman, but I barely came up to his shoulders.

His jaw was sharp and square, as if he were a god of war sculpted from marble. The only parts of him that looked soft were his lips and the dark hair that fell to his shoulders, half of it pulled back in a tie.

I didn't know if it was his violent beauty that stole my breath, or the primal part of me telling me to run from this very dangerous predator.

His eyes, the blue of an angry sea, studied me as he said a single unfamiliar word. The horse stiffened, and I swore its eyes turned shrewd. There wasn't enough gold in the city to tempt me to try to steal that horse now. It looked more dangerous than Durnth's damned dogs.

"This her?" He still looked at me, but the question was to Durnth.

I bristled. "Don't speak as if I'm not here, asshole."

I could have sworn the corner of his mouth twitched, but otherwise he didn't react to my bite.

Durnth squeezed my shoulder, hard—a warning. Whoever this man was, he was someone that Durnth was wary of.

Interesting.

"This is her, Cazien," Durnth answered and I crossed my arms. "The rest of the crew are inside if you wish to meet them."

That name was familiar, heard in passing, but why?

"So long as they can follow orders and stay sober on duty, they'll do. I need the guide more than them."

I frowned. "Guide?" I'm certain he didn't need a guide for the city of Constinbul.

"I'm leading an expedition in Aeaea. Durnth says you're familiar with the area."

"No," I said before he'd even finished. Durnth squeezed my shoulder. I looked at him, dread and betrayal warring inside of me. "I won't go back there."

That's where everything went wrong. Where I was stolen from my innocence.

"Min, he's paying handsomely. Do this job and you can cross the Great Sea and never have to see my face again." Durnth's voice was gentle, but his eyes hard. If I didn't agree to this job, the client would find someone else and the Hallows would lose a lot of gold. Which never worked out well for the person who caused it.

I ignored my racing heart and forced myself to speak evenly as I met Cazien's eyes. "Who are you?"

"Cazien Talon."

My stomach dropped out from under me. I had snapped at a gods-damned Talon brother. Why the shit didn't Durnth warn me?

Probably because if I knew who we were meeting, I'd have disappeared in the night.

Cazien Talon was more than a warlord. He was a lord *of* war. A ruthless killer without hesitation or remorse, even for the smallest offenses. Men would follow him into battle to see him in his element: blood and death.

No wonder he didn't bother with being armed to the teeth in these streets. Fucking with him was a death sentence. The only thing you could hope for was a quick death.

As dangerous as he was, he was nothing compared to my past. I narrowed my eyes.

"What are you looking for? It's a country of rocks, vineyards, and too much humidity in the overgrown jungles."

"That will be made clear when we're crossing the Dark Sea." He reached into his doublet and pulled out a coin pouch, tossing it to me. It was heavier than expected and, when opened, was stuffed with gold. "Durnth warned me I'd have to convince you. Consider this a signing bonus."

It was a lot of gold. More than I'd made this year. Combined with the funds I'd squirreled away in the bank, it'd almost be enough to get me an apprenticeship, even at my age. Was I really going to consider going back there?

"How long do you expect to be there?" If it was an expedition, maybe we wouldn't be spending time in the city.

"Once we dock, I suspect four weeks if my information is correct. If it's not,"—he tilted his head, considering—"maybe six or eight weeks."

"And how long in Grotto?"

"A night. We'll dock, outfit the expedition in town, then depart the next morning. Then another night on return."

A day and a night in Grotto each way. How likely was it that anyone would recognize me after ten years? I was little more than child. But I would recognize people. That might be worse.

"If I'm doing this, I have conditions."

"Min—"

Cazien held up his hand and Durnth's mouth snapped shut.

"I stay in a private cabin on the ship you've booked. Both ways. And a private tent. Finally, whatever you planned on paying me on return, double it."

"Done."

I blinked. More suspicious of the job now, I asked, "How many people do you expect to survive this?"

He smirked, a look of respect in his eyes. I ignored the flip of my stomach. Having his full attention on me was intense. If I ran, would he give chase?

"If we don't run into any trouble? Everyone, so long as there are no accidents."

"And if there's trouble?"

"Why, darling, are you afraid?"

I snorted. "No. I want to make sure that if I'm going back to Aeaea, I'm going to get paid."

"The payout will be worth any trouble we run into."

Cazien wasn't arrogant. He spoke like a general planning a battle. He had all the information, and he believed we'd win. Maybe even a rout. Even if he wouldn't tell us what we were up against yet.

Durnth shifted next to me.

Dammit, I was really going to do this.

"When do we leave?"

"Ship's being readied now. We leave today on the afternoon tide."

"And if I wouldn't have agreed?" He was cutting it close.

His smirk disappeared and he turned away, mounting up, the horse relaxing with a command. He was as graceful as a snake and just as deadly.

"You would have."

It sounded like a threat. I didn't like it.

Cazien lifted the reins, rocking to urge the horse forward. He looked over his shoulder. "Dock eight," he told Durnth.

Then the bastard winked at me.

When Cazien disappeared around the corner, Durnth turned to me.

"Min—"

"Stop." Durnth's eyes narrowed at me. He didn't like the disrespect but I didn't like being blindsided. "I'm going back there for this job. Then I'm done with the Hallows. And you're not going to retire me like you have the others. I'm going, and you won't hunt me down."

"I'll book you the passage across the sea myself."

I sighed, looking down at the heavy pouch in my hand. Everyone had a price to cross their lines, and I'd discovered mine. I might already be regretting it.

Durnth didn't stop me as I walked away. He'd be going in to gather the rest of the Hallows. I didn't know how many Cazien hired, but Durnth wouldn't risk the Hallows' power in Constinbul. Other gangs would be looking to move in the moment they heard the Hallows' numbers were down.

I walked through the streets, savoring the rich scents of turmeric and cinnamon, sizzling onions and fresh rolls, and roasting goat. I'd fought my way up the ranks in the Hallows, and I'd made this city my home. Durnth might have taken me in, but the streets taught me more than he ever could.

Aeaea might have taken my innocence, but Constinbul filled the empty hollow inside my chest with determination and spite. Never again would men raid my life and tear it apart.

These streets, filled with life, struggle, and laughter, coated me in their filth. It rubbed salt in my wounded childhood, and forged me in its violence. It made me dangerous. More dangerous than the men who killed my parents before trying to sell me.

I went to Tamera's. If I was going to be traveling, I'd need new gear and she never tried to get me to pay in favors. Sure, the other shops would take coin, but there was always the invitation to pay with other means. Hell with that.

The tan-skinned woman stepped out from the back of the shop as I came in, a small bell tinkling as the door opened.

"Minerva," she greeted, hands on her hips. "Don't tell me you've ripped the pants you just bought."

I snorted and juggled the coin pouch in my hand. Her eyes followed it through the air. "I'm headed out of town for a while. I need a new wardrobe. All the works."

A slow, wide smile grew on her face. It would make her month with how much I would be leaving with.

"Then let's get started, hmm?"

She turned the shop sign to closed, and we walked to the back, past all the dresses and frills towards what I'd really need.

It took an hour, going through her inventory, to select clothing that would fit Aeaea's humid weather but would handle weeks on horseback. Next came the breastbands and underclothes and socks. I didn't want to take anything I already had. I'd already decided, if I needed to, I'd escape the expedition and strike out across the Great Sea myself. Crossing Durnth was bad.

But Cazien... if I had to run from him, I needed to be ready to give everything up.

Tamera packed everything for me in an oiled pack, tying two new pairs of boots to the outside.

"Who has this much gold for a signing bonus?" she asked as I pulled out ten gold pieces. It was more than I owed, but she wouldn't refuse it. No one did here.

"Cazien Talon." I tucked the coin purse where it'd be damn hard to steal. She grabbed my wrist and I met her fear filled eyes. It was a normal reaction when people heard his family's name.

"Be careful, Minerva." Alarm coated her words. I gave her a smile, but we both knew it was forced.

"As careful as I can be," I promised.

She let me go. I couldn't look back as I left, because I knew she watched me like I was headed to the gallows.

Checking the sun, I had enough time to get back to my room—not with the rest of the Hallows—and collect the few items I'd take. Jenny across the hall could take whatever I

left behind. I didn't trust the landlord to keep my room open, even if I paid him.

The small room was big enough for my narrow bed, a chest of drawers that served as a wash stand, and the small table which held a single candle. I dropped the pack on the bed, the frame squeaking under the weight. At least I wouldn't miss the bed while I was gone. Next place I'd get would have a real feather mattress.

I tugged off my boots, replacing them with one of the new pairs I bought from Tamera. She was a seamstress, but her husband was a shoemaker. He'd been injured in war, like so many others. But his hands worked fine and I doubted any shoemaker outside of the royal court could make a better pair.

They were kid hide, soft and supple, and wouldn't blister my feet despite being new. There was even enough space to slide a small dagger into each boot.

The only thing I grabbed from the drawers were my cycle cloths. We'd be gone long enough that I'd need them.

Refusing to let doubt or fear enter my thoughts, I pulled my bandolier across my chest, checking each of the five blades. Then I reached under the bed, dragging out the sword I kept there. I could use it, but there was little need in the city. Daggers worked better in city brawls, but I wanted every weapon I could carry. Even if only to feel better while in Grotto.

Last, I dropped two gold coins on the table where they couldn't be missed.

Prepared, I closed the door, the tick of the lock mundane to the sensation of this life drawing to a close. It was a short

distance to Jenny's where I rapped my knuckles against the door. Her five-year-old twins were loud as she shushed them. When she opened it, her face brightened despite the ruckus behind her.

"You look like you're going to war."

I shrugged a shoulder and held out the key. "I'm going to be gone for a while. Long enough that the landlord will give my room to someone else. I took everything I needed. You can have the rest. Sell it, use it, whatever. If I come back, I won't have any use for it."

She stared at the key before accepting it. "If he asks?"

"Tell him I left," I said with another shrug. "Just clean it out today. Word's going to spread that the Hallows have taken a big job and I doubt it'll be long before someone else tries."

I let out an umph when Jenny threw her arms around me, hugging tight. Startled, it was a moment before I hugged her back.

"When you get back, come see me," she ordered. "I want to know about this adventure. The twins will too." She let me go, a watery smile on her face. Jenny was one of the few people I'd call a friend, and my own eyes welled up.

"Prospero keep you safe, Jenny."

"May he keep you safe as well."

I turned away before her tears fell, thoughts already on the ship waiting for me at the docks.

I doubted Prospero would keep me safe where I was going.

## CHAPTER TWO



The ship Cazien had chartered swarmed with deckhands. It was large, though not the size of other passenger or cargo ships docked there. It had a single large mast, the sails wrapped up tight.

The hull was a warm brown in the afternoon sun, and clean enough to prove the worth of the captain. Men marched up and down the gangplank with trunks, boxes, and barrels, some I recognized as Hallows. They nodded to me as I joined the line waiting to board.

Reaching the deck, I ignored the jolt of nerves threatening to swallow me. The last time I'd been on a ship, it was when I'd been traveling from Aeaea. I'd stayed in the bowels of the ship, one more piece of cargo.

I wasn't a frightened child anymore.

Crossing the deck, I watched the horizon. It wasn't too late to turn back. I gripped the rail, my nails digging into the wood, each slap of the water against the hull an attack on the barrier between me and my memories. The breeze smelled of brine and fish, drowning out the familiar smells

of Constinbul. I hadn't avoided the coast, not exactly. But I would never love the ocean like some people did.

Spice and sage mixed with the brine a moment before Cazien stood at my side, his hands gripping the rail in a mirror of mine. I glanced at him, his face still a pillar of marble. He wore the same clothes as before, having discarded the doublet somewhere. The white shirt stretched across his broad chest and tucked into his waistband. Set against the ship and sea, Cazien looked like a connoisseur of travel.

"Durnth tells me you lived in Aeaea before coming to the city."

It wasn't a question, but I nodded, stomach tied in knots. Had Durnth told him my past, and my family's connections?

He turned to look at me. "Not going to elaborate?"

"Not here." I looked at the men behind us. I'd tell him only what was necessary, enough for him to decide if I could be the guide he needed or not.

He nodded once, turning away from the view. "Come. I'll show you to the quarters."

Before we could move far, an unexpected passenger stepped on board with a smile hiding any manner of threats.

"Durnth." I stared at him, and a warning flickered in his eyes. Why the hell was the boss of the Hallows working this job? Did he seriously leave Marvin in charge? Marvin was a decent second, but he didn't have a head for business.

"You'll be joining us, then?" Cazien asked, his words were ambivalent as he crossed his arms over his chest. "I

won't be paying you a higher rate than any of the other hired swords."

"Fine by me, Talon." Durnth meant it, which sent up a warning flair. "I decided to take the opportunity to inspect Aeaea during the trip. See if there are any business opportunities for expansion."

"And you'll be able to keep your men in line."

"And woman," Durnth said, nodding towards me. His patronizing tone made me bristle.

The sailors manning the ship gave me a wide berth already. Some of them had even made the sign of Sedus, god of the sea. It was bad luck to have a woman on a ship not meant for passengers. This ship might be carrying men, but from the rigging on the rails, and the pulleys above doors inlaid in the deck, it was a ship built for combat rather than travel.

"I'll introduce you to Captain Resuld," Cazien said, ignoring Durnth's comment entirely. He looked across the deck where a man of similar build to him guided two horses up the plank. It was the same horse Cazien had ridden in the morning, the one behind it as massive. The only real difference was this horse was a roan, the sun making the horse burnish a deep auburn.

"Gavret," Cazien called out, and the man looked towards them. "When the horses are settled, take Minerva to the quarters."

The man nodded, leading the horses down a ramp that opened in the middle of the deck. Cazien led Durnth away and I crossed my arms, irritated at being a piece of

baggage. Everyone seemed to have a task assigned to them, and I was only being shown to my room?

Gavret reappeared from below, and when he got closer, I didn't know how I hadn't seen the resemblance right away. Gavret was definitely another Talon brother.

"This way." His voice was clipped, rough where Cazien's was smooth, like his voice was filled with smoke.

I followed, the crew parting around us instead of forcing us to walk around them. Gavret was tall, but not quite as tall as Cazien, and their faces were strikingly similar. The biggest difference was Gavret's eyes were a dark blue, so dark they almost looked purple. And, there was no missing the brutal scar on his face—three claw marks appearing from his hairline above his ear, slashing down his cheek before stopping under his eye.

"Family adventure, then?" I asked as we climbed down the narrow stairs. The boat rocked on the gentle water and the scent of the sea wasn't suffocating the air down here. It smelled fresh, clean, as if the walls had been scrubbed with lemon. No doubt by this time tomorrow, the ocean would claim the air once more, but if the captain took this good of care of the ship, it boded well.

Gavret grunted, which I interpreted as both an affirmative as well as a command to stop talking.

He led me to the very end of the hall, near the ship's stern, and opened the door, turning to the side to let me slip in. "Cazien doesn't stand on ceremony, so you're not expected to be on deck for cast-off."

I nodded once, and he turned back down the hall. Closing the door, I rested my head against the smooth

wood, breathing deep. I was really doing this. I was really going back there.

Eight weeks at the most before I started my new life across the sea. I could do this. I must do this.

I turned around to inspect my quarters and blinked, my mind blanking. This couldn't be right.

Two rows of plate sized portholes lined the back wall, letting in enough sunlight a lantern wasn't required. The cabin, for it was definitely a cabin, had a square table bolted to the floors, four chairs around it. Along the back wall was a full-sized bed, twice as big as the one in my rented room. Drawers were built into the ship walls, along with shelves with glass doors. There were books, maps, and curios filling the shelves, and I was pretty sure the top shelf actually had multiple bottles of different alcohols.

This wasn't a private room with a narrow bunk like I'd expected.

The door opened and I whirled around to see Cazien filling the doorway.

"Good, you're here." I had to step back out of the way as he pushed into the room, dropping his pack and scabbard on the table. "Quarters meet your requirements?"

I snorted. "You didn't have to kick the captain out of his room for me."

"I didn't," he said as he dug into his packs. "I kicked him out for me."

I blinked at him before taking in the room again. There was already a trunk here, clearly battered and worn. And the bed wasn't perfectly made. Heat burned my cheeks as I clenched my fists.

"Just because I am a woman doesn't mean you can force me to share your bed."

He didn't look up at me as he pulled a thick folded parchment out, slouching into one of the chairs, legs sprawled apart. "I'm flattered, Minerva, but no, I had no such plans."

"Then why was I brought here? I'd requested a private room."

Cazien looked at me then, his eyes dark, his figure silhouetted by the gentle sunlight. "This is a private room."

I reminded myself who this was in front of me before I rolled my eyes.

"My *own* personal room."

"Should have specified that this morning, darling."

I didn't stop the growl rumbling in my chest. No way was I staying in the same room as Cazien Talon. I never shared my room with any man, nor did I let any man in my bed.

I knew what men like the ones I worked with expected from women and the first time one of them had tried to put their hands on me, I'd cut off two of his fingers.

After a few more men lost appendages or gained vicious scars, my reputation spread. No one wanted to bed me after, which suited me damn fine.

"Is that what the payment was for? To be a guide and your whore?"

His lips curled into a slow, heat-filled smile as he made a show of drinking me in. I knew what he'd see. My light brown hair pulled tight in a braid, fair skin not even the Scrya sun could darken, and a figure I tried to hide with breastbands and long tunics.

"I don't need to pay women to bed me," he drawled, his voice thick as honey and as dangerous as a cornered dog. "I might make an exception for you, though. If you need the coin."

Gods, his voice was sin and my cheeks flushed with anger and desire. So I did what I'd done to other men who thought they could get me between the sheets with a few words. I slid a dagger the length of my palm from the bandolier and threw it. It landed in the lip of the chair exposed by his spread legs. A clear threat.

Instead of shock, or instinctual panic, Cazien's eyes grew hotter and his smirk turned positively lustful.

"Violence, my favorite form of foreplay."

My stomach tightened, but I grit my teeth. "I don't care if it's your favorite. If you put your hands on me, I don't care if you're Cazien Talon, I'll cut your balls off and feed them to you."

Cazien rose to his feet, his eyes never leaving mine as he walked towards me. I locked my knees, and held myself still, but ice-cold fear replaced the heat in my blood. He didn't walk, he prowled. His smile turned into a violent promise. I didn't back down, though. I refused to be intimidated by him on the first day.

"You are sleeping in here, darling, because I'm a very bad man. We're going to be on the sea for a week, and you're the only woman on board. So, choose. Take your chances with me, or sleep where the others can get to you."

I curled my lip but said nothing as I looked away.

"That's what I thought." He moved past me and opened the door, the sounds of the deck above faint. I could hear

someone shouting orders, other men on the same level grumbling as they hauled heavy boxes down the stairs.

"And Minerva," Cazien said, pausing in the doorway. I raised my eyes to his. "If I put my hands on you, I promise it'll be because you want it."

I gaped at him as he left, closing the door behind him.

That man, that wicked and dangerous man... was infuriating.

Fine, if he was so arrogant, I'd ignore him. I wouldn't give him the attention he clearly was used to. I didn't even care if he was right about the potential threat the crew presented. The Hallows members knew not to mess with me, but the others? Truthfully, I had enough to deal with on this journey without having to add defending my body to the list.

Dropping my pack next to the bed, I considered rejoining the rest on the deck. But, frankly, I didn't feel like dealing with Durnth—not after Cazien had managed to rile me up. I retrieved my knife and stared at the aged parchment left there. Cazien's bag and scabbard lay there too. I'd be offended that he didn't consider me a risk if he was anyone else. As it was, I planned to draw as little of his attention to me as I could.

The parchment, however, was too tempting a mystery. Was it a part of this mysterious expedition he'd hired me and the Hallows for?

With a look to the door, I sat at the table, even as the boat lurched to the side. We'd pushed off the dock then, from the increased rocking and the shouts I could make out

through the portholes. Pushing Cazien's things out of the center of the table, I carefully unfolded the parchment.

It was dark with age, but instead of feeling brittle or thin, it felt soft as leather. I smelled it, but couldn't discern any scent of tanning oils that might reveal the true material. Still, the folds were creased and cracked, so I gingerly laid it out on the table.

It was a map of Aeaea—a really, really old one lacking some of the villages I knew were there.

There were light graphite notations, clearly a recent addition, marking three different areas. One was near the mountain Aeaea was named for, another on the coast furthest from Grotto, and the final one lay in an area comprised of limestone hills too dry and arid to grow even the hardiest of vines. "What are you looking for?"

I scanned the map, hoping there would be a clue. But there was nothing. I folded it again, careful to fold it exactly as it had been, when my finger caught on a thin lip of a pocket. Curious, I slid my nail over it, catching it enough to open it. Inside was a piece of parchment so thin it was nearly transparent. In cramped, slanted handwriting, was a message.

*Descend through desolation as Sedus conquers the beasts of Agni, the nectar of the stars will show the way.*

I read it a few times, but it didn't make sense. Sedus conquering Agni's beasts? What the hell did the gods have to do with the map?

I slipped it back into the thin pocket, careful not to tear the thin paper. I paced the cabin's length, each lap looking out a porthole to see Constinbul further away in the distance. The sky was clear, and the Dark Sea was as peaceful as it ever got.

I couldn't go to the deck, not until water reached to every horizon. Then I wouldn't give in to the small part of me wanting to swim back to shore. Even if Sedus or his siren wives dragged me under, I would risk it. No, better to stay in the cabin until the urge to run disappeared.

Out of desperation, I went to the encased bookshelves, studying the tomes. I was surprised by the wide variety of the collection. Along with maritime history, there were tomes covering every kingdom on this side of the Great Sea, and the kingdoms I didn't recognize, I figured were on the other side. Would I travel to one of them after this job was finished?

I was about to reach for one when a familiar title caught my eye. I moved down the shelves, a smile spreading across my face, and I didn't bother hiding it. The shelf was full of fictional work, collections of tales and legends, and even novels. When I tried to raise the glass door, it opened with ease.

I selected a book at random and toed my boots off at the end of the bed. Clambering on, I rested up against the headboard, ignoring the sway of the boat as it threatened to turn my stomach. If the sea got rough, I might find myself with my head in a bucket.

I cracked the book open, but struggled to focus on the words. All around me was the smell of him—dark spice and

sage and the faintest hint of leather oil.

Looking around the cabin again, there really was no other place for me to sleep. Maybe one of the crew members would bring in a cot? If not, I'd slept in worse places than the floor of a cabin room. Until then, though, I was going to enjoy the decadent comfort of the mattress and read.

The story was one I remembered my father telling me, when we'd traveled across Aeaea and I couldn't sleep. A princess stole away from home, boarded a ship, and sailed across the sea.

She'd featured in many adventures. The one I fell into featured a dragon, a wicked curse, and a battle for gold.

I so often wished to be her, to sail across the sea and have grand adventures. When I finally sailed, there was no valiant hero to stand at my side.

Even now, surrounded by Cazien Talon's scent, I would be a fool to believe myself a princess on an adventure. There may be adventure ahead of me, but it was filled with shadows and Cazien most certainly was not a valiant man.

The daylight lessened until I had to squint to read, too caught up to find the flint for the lantern. I'd curled onto my side, propping my head up as the book lay on the mattress. Reading had distracted me until the small threat of nausea had retreated.

When the door opened, I let out a startled yelp.

A dark low laugh followed and I glared at Cazien as he walked towards me. When he began to pull the white shirt out of his pants, my mouth went dry and I froze in shock.

"I see you've changed your mind about joining me in bed?"

My eyes went wide as he pulled the shirt off, tossing it towards his trunk. Before I could take in the newly revealed muscles and flesh, Cazien struck.

## CHAPTER THREE



**I** acted on instinct. I kicked out, striking his hand wrapped around my ankle, and twisted, throwing myself off the bed. I drew my dagger and widened my stance, ready to fight despite the rocking of the ship.

He swung, and I ducked, swinging my fist out. I didn't know why I didn't use my dagger. Something about the idea of it threw me. I'd never hesitated using steel on an opponent before.

Cazien was grinning, even as he caught my hand as it struck his side and yanked me to him. He caught my other wrist as I finally moved with the dagger, bending it until I was forced to drop the blade.

I was flush against his chest, pinned by his strength, and my anger was quickly morphing into something totally inappropriate for the situation.

His heat scorched my skin through the tunic, his own chest hardly moving as I panted. Where his fingers dug into my forearms, lightning radiated out through me, going to every spot that should not be interested in him.

It really didn't help that he was looking at me with eyes promising wicked things.

Things I've never experienced.

His eyes dropped to my lips, and I tilted my head up. He slowly leaned down, as if caught in the same tension I was.

And then I kneed him in the balls.

He let go of me with a pained huff and sat hard on the bed, his brows pinched. I went for my dagger, ready to fight more, but stopped as he began to laugh.

"Good. You can stay in the room."

The fight left me, replaced with confusion. "What?"

He rose, waving a hand at me as I lifted the blade again. "Needed to make sure you weren't all talk earlier."

Cazien moved to the trunk his shirt had landed on and grabbed out a fresh tunic, pulling it on without a look at me.

"I'm sure I'm not the first to say this, but you're an asshole." I shoved the dagger back into its sheath at my belt.

He snorted, and ran his hand through his dark hair before tying it back with a leather strap. Only a single lock fell across his forehead, softening his otherwise harsh face.

"Only my brothers and friends call me one to my face," he said, clearly amused. He nodded towards the opposite wall where there were two hooks. "You can string my hammock there for the journey."

Well, a hammock was better than the floor. But... "What, no honorable offer to let the lady have the bed?"

Cazien sat in the chair I'd been in earlier and looked at me, his eyebrow raised. "Are you a lady, Minerva?"

Not anymore. Instead of letting him see the pain his question brought, I rolled my eyes, scoffing.

He pulled the map towards him, unfolding it. "My brother, Captain Resuld, and Durnth should be here soon with dinner. I'll be explaining the job then."

I noticed he made no move to clear his gear from the table. If he expected me to keep the room clean for him, he'd need to think again. I shoved his pack far enough to a side to clear the table in front of a second seat across from him.

"Anything interesting in there?" he asked without looking up.

"I didn't go through it if that's what you're asking."

"Hmm."

A beat of silence save the sounds of the sea echoing through the ship and the muffled calls of the crew.

"Would you have gone through my bags?" I asked, curious.

"Of course."

I didn't know why his answer surprised me.

"You don't have a concept of boundaries, do you?"

He looked up from the map of Aeaea, all traces of humor gone from his expression. "No. I haven't survived as long as I have by allowing boundaries. I would think, given your position, you'd understand."

He had me there. Any other Hallows member probably would have eagerly torn through his bag, Talon reputation or not.

"That's an old map." Deflection was one of my strengths. Cazien didn't call me on it.

“Roughly two hundred years old, if my sources are to be believed and it is genuine.” A knock at the door was quickly followed by Gavret entering. Durnth, and who I assumed to be the captain, followed behind him. A cabin boy, no more than twelve, carried a tray laden with plates. Clearly he was used to the duty, skillfully navigating the rise and fall of the ship without a single plate rattling.

“Captain,” Cazien greeted with a nod. He looked at Durnth, his expression matching the same one he held when he met us in the morning. “Durnth. Again, can I say what a surprise it is that you’ve joined this adventure.”

Gavret moved his brother’s gear, allowing the captain and Durnth to sit at the table. Gavret leaned against the wall, his arms crossed as he watched the table. The cabin boy set the tray down on the top of a set of drawers and began serving the table. The captain was the one who lit the lantern, setting it in the middle.

Cazien directed the boy to put his plate to the side of the map, uncaring if it crowded the captain’s setting. Gavret waved the boy’s offer away, but did accept one of the mugs of ale handed out next.

Durnth picked up his fork, eager to dig in, but when no one else did—he seemed to remember he wasn’t at the top of the food chain anymore. He set the fork back down, and I’m sure he wanted to mutter something, but Durnth knew when to keep his mouth shut.

When the boy departed, Cazien pointed to the map and met every eye at the table.

“This map will lead us to King Xanu’s lost treasure.”

Someone barked out a laugh and I swallowed hard when I realized it had been me. The men looked at me, and I knew Durnth wanted to kick me.

“Seriously?” I leaned back against the chair. “If I’d know you were hunting after a legend, I wouldn’t have taken the job, no matter all the gold you offered.”

“Minerva,” Durnth growled my name.

Cazien folded his fingers together, resting his elbows on the table, and studied me. A small incline of his head prompted me to continue.

“Even if it’s real, if it was on Aeaea it would have been found already. The island isn’t big. Only half of the island is habitable and the rest is either volcanic rock or thick jungle.”

“Which would make it the perfect place to store the spoils of his raids,” Cazien countered.

Durnth and the captain watched us warily, while Gavret watched his brother. I could swear there was speculation behind those eyes.

I snorted. “I’ve been all over the island. There’s only one safe place to port a ship any larger than a fishing schooner. If the legendary king of raiders landed there, they’d still be talking about it to this day. And let’s not forget the supposed curse.”

Durnth sputtered, looking to Cazien finally. Durnth could stand by himself in front of an angry mob without shitting himself, but magic? He didn’t mess with magic. My grin was more of a baring of teeth.

“Anyone who searches for it is struck down by the ghost of Xanu himself, and he adds every soul to his ghostly

defenders of his hoard.”

Cazien sent a look to Durnth. “If, as Minerva says, the treasure is not on Aeaea, then you have nothing to fear of a supposed curse.”

“And if it is?”

Cazien leaned back in his chair, cocking his head at the leader of the Hallows. “Do you know how much gold is said to be in King Xanu’s hoard? Jewels? Magical artifacts?”

I glared at Cazien as Durnth’s expression morphed into something more considering. Cazien knew it too. He leaned forward, meeting the gang leader’s gaze.

“These are the terms. If we find this hoard, every single man”—he looked to me—“and woman, of this crew is free to take as much of the hoard as they can carry.”

“And if it’s not there?” I demanded, my voice steel. Gallivanting through dense jungle and pumice hills with my past shadowing my every move was not something I was willing to do for cheap.

“If this venture ends in disappointment, then every crew member will receive a hundred gold pieces. And when we land in Grotto, the first twenty-five pieces will be handed out.”

Durnth whistled low. A hundred gold pieces each. The so-called signing bonus he’d given me had been thirty pieces. Cazien’s stormy eyes met mine.

“And our deal still stands, darling.”

Two hundred gold pieces. I drummed my fingers on the table, looking at the map. The food’s rich smell of spice and grilled tomato and peppers, the savory thin strips of lamb underneath it all, made my stomach growl. I hadn’t had

time to grab something to eat since before first meeting with Cazien.

He seemed to be waiting for my decision. I was the guide after all.

"I need to eat before I decide if I'd rather swim back to Constinbul or stay on this fool's errand."

He nodded, folding the map deftly, and held it up over his shoulder. Gavret grabbed it silently, and Cazien finally pulled his food in front of him.

I stayed silent as I ate the spice-laden food. It had thick flatbread under it, and I tore strips of it off, folding it together before bringing it to my mouth like the others around me.

Halfway through the meal, the captain and Cazien began to talk, and I listened while keeping my eyes on the plate in front of me. Durnth would look up, but hadn't yet contributed to their conversation.

"Grotto's docking fee is substantial, given the limited size of the port," Resuld said, reaching for the mug of ale.

"It'll be handled," Cazien said. "Besides, I'll be splitting the crew. Gavret will lead the men staying here. I want you to explore the coastline."

I snorted, but other than a glance at me, Cazien said nothing. I pointedly took a large bite of the soaked bread.

There was a reason Grotto was the only port. The coastline of Aeaea was nearly nonexistent. If it wasn't sheer cliffs, it was jungle all the way to the water. There were strips of sandy beaches, no longer or wider than a man is tall. And even if there were beaches, getting to them in anything other than small canoe was laughable. Crags and

towers of black rock pierced the angry azure waters. The currents whipped around the pillars, and only osprey and desperate men fished those waters.

"Gavret has Zypher," Cazien said, indicating the man behind him. "He'll send word every three days during the journey. I may have new orders for you if we find something."

I studied Gavret again, wondering who or what exactly Zypher was. Durnth grunted, patting his rotund stomach with satisfaction and downing the rest of his ale. He never had the best manners.

"If that's all I'm needed for, I'll be heading down below then. I'll split my men up before we get to Grotto and make sure they know their orders."

Durnth nodded to me. "Be sure to check in with me, Min. He may be paying us all, but I'm still your boss."

My face burned as he left. He had to pull rank on someone and I was the only one in the room beneath him.

The captain left as well, promising to send the cabin boy—Thames—in to clear the table.

When the door was shut again, Gavret finally came to the table, stopping first to grab the remaining plate of food.

"Doesn't seem poisoned." Cazien pushed his plate forward, mostly eaten. "If it was, it'd have kicked in by now."

Gavret grunted, tearing into the bread. The sauces had thickened and no doubt it was nearly cold. I hadn't considered poison, truthfully.

"Do you often find yourself in situations where people try to poison you?" I took another drink of the tepid ale. It

wasn't watered, surprisingly. Any sailor I'd heard around the streets of Hallows' headquarters always seemed to complain about captains watering down the drinks.

"Often enough to take precautions," was all Cazien said. His eyes turned shrewd. "Durnth said you lived in Aeaea, traveled the island."

The food turned to lead in my stomach and I took another drink.

"Yes," I answered, hoping he'd leave it.

Of course, he didn't.

"Tell me."

I stared at the woodgrain of the table, trying to shuffle through my history and decide what I could hide and what I needed to share.

"I traveled with my father. He expected me to take over the estate's business." So long as any future husband didn't force me to stay home. "He had no sons. Just me. The main exports of Aeaea are wine and oil, I assume you know?"

At Cazien's nod, I continued.

"He was a cartographer, he mapped the island. He tested the soils for viability."

And he traded secrets, smuggled, and stole from the governor of Grotto. He took me with him, teaching me how to take readings of the land and translate numbers to lines on parchment. Because no one would suspect a doting father of crime when, for all appearances, he was teaching his young daughter the trade.

"You still remember the island well? I expect we'll be making our own paths at certain points."

I laughed mirthlessly and pointed with my ale cup at him. “Look, for two hundred gold pieces, I’ll tag along and use everything I remember to help keep us alive. But I’m telling you, if the jungle doesn’t kill us than the Kanoi might.”

“Kanoi?” Gavret had finished his plate, turning his entire attention to me.

Now I didn’t just have the weight of one of the Talon brothers, because they most definitely were brothers, but two.

I cocked my head, studying the man. He looked similar enough to Cazien, but Gavret kept his hair trimmed short, and there were three scars along the side of his head—as if gouged there by claws.

Refilling my ale, I raised the pitcher in question. Gavret shook his head, but Cazien slid his cup towards me. Filling it, I asked my own question. “You’re the Talon they call the Hunter, right?”

Cazien grinned, one of real mirth, and it lit up his face. It transformed him from dangerous to entralling and it was a heady thing. Maybe I shouldn’t drink any more if I was going to be caught up by a man’s smile.

“Yes,” Gavret answered, rolling his eyes at his brother.

“Kanoi are Aeaeans who are said to have lived where the limestone fields are. Some of them now live in the jungles and others still make the canyons their home. Either way, they’re hunters of men. Anyone who ventures out beyond the wall of Grotto doesn’t go without food to bribe them.”

Gavret crossed his arms, tilting his head as if intrigued. “Why not gold?”

"They don't eat gold."

Cazien snorted. "And if they forget food for bribes?"

I grinned viciously. "Then the travelers become the food."

"Jungles, cannibals, impossible coasts," Gavret drawled, turning a stare onto his brother. "Sounds like a lovely adventure you've dragged me on."

"You could have stayed," Cazien argued.

"And risk running my sword through Lord Carrington finally?" Gavret shook his head. "Brannen would have my head on a pike if I finally started a blood war between our families. At least you only annoy dear Lord Talon by exploring the world and investigating every brothel."

I was surprised to watch the brothers tease one another. If I'd been asked a week ago what I expected Demonbane Cazien and his brother, Gavret the Hunter, would be like together—I'd have said speaking about various ways to kill people and sharpen weapons.

"I'm writing a book, I'll have you know."

Gavret snorted and poured his remaining ale into Cazien's cup as he stood. "And I'm done for the evening. I've got the watch posted. Good evening, Minerva."

I raised my cup in salute. As he left, Thames snuck in and quickly cleared the remains of dinner. As fast as he entered, he was gone again, after a quick check to see if there was anything else we needed.

When I was sure we wouldn't be interrupted, I cleared my throat.

"Why didn't you tell them about the message attached to the map?"

Long enough passed that I feared Cazien was angry and I wondered if I'd survive the night. But then the left side of his mouth pulled up in a knowing look. "So you did have a look around."

I flushed at the evident approval in his voice. What was it about this man that had me so off-kilter and reacting like a blushing girl just off leading strings?

"I said nothing because other than my brother, I don't trust anyone on this ship."

"And now that I know?"

"Depends. Do you plan on telling Durnth?"

I contemplated his question. Would I tell the man who took me into his gang and gave me a chance at a life outside of a brothel or servitude about a cryptic message? Durnth wasn't like a father to me, he'd made it clear he'd never go easy on me. But we weren't in Constinbul anymore, and in two months, I'd be on my way across the Great Sea.

So the question really was how much I owed Durnth? After ten years, I'd more than paid off any monetary debts I'd incurred with him and I went without rather than risk taking loans.

"No," I said at last. "I don't see why he has to know."

Cazien's look was hard, and I didn't flinch away. He'd either see the truth in them, or believe I was lying. Either way, he didn't trust me. The room darkened around us as the moment stretched into minutes. I shoved my heels into the floor, refusing to let my knee bounce with nerves. The lantern between us cast shadows onto Cazien's face, giving him an eerie similarity to the demon he'd slain to earn his name.

"Good." He rose, body languid, his cup loose between his fingers as he moved the short distance to the bed. He threw himself down on it, one leg hanging off the edge, an arm behind his head.

I got the impression he was done with me for the evening. I went to the wall with the hooks, crouching to open the oiled leather bag on the floor. Inside was a hammock, woven out of thick wool, to my surprise. I'd expected a standard ship hammock, something like a fishing net and about as comfortable.

It was short work to string it between the two hooks. On the left, I hung my bandolier near the end where my head would be, on the right side of the same end, I hung my sword.

Eyes were on me, but when I turned, Cazien's eyes were closed, face turned towards the ceiling.

I slipped off my boots but hesitated before I climbed in. It was still early enough I would have trouble falling asleep. The book I'd been reading was still on the bed, but on the other side of Cazien.

Lie in the hammock bored or deal with getting the book back?

I closed my eyes, asking for strength, and moved to the bed. The moment I was at the side, his eyes opened, meeting mine with unnerving accuracy. This time I was ready, though, and before he said anything, I spoke.

"I'm certain I'll enjoy that hammock much more than I would this bed. May I please have the book?"

He gestured to it, closing his eyes. "By all means."

I grit my teeth and leaned over him. He was so damned wide and the book was on the far side of the bed near the wall. Finally, I had to press my legs up against his, even as I curved to avoid touching his chest with mine again. The moment my fingers touched the book's hard cover, I snatched it and straightened, ignoring the overwhelming scent of him.

I climbed into the hammock, cradling the book to my chest, and spread my new cloak over my body as a blanket.

"Sleep well, darling."

I swore as soon as I had my two hundred gold, I'd throw a book at his head.

## CHAPTER FOUR



**W**hen I woke up, Cazien had already left the room. I'd fallen asleep reading, dreaming about racing across sand dunes on horseback, the thrill of adventure coursing through my veins. It still lingered as I swung my legs over the hammock, a small smile on my face.

There was a book sitting on the table between the hammock and bed. I stilled, well, as much as I could while sitting in a hammock on a ship.

I hadn't put the book up, I knew that much. For it to get all the way over there, I'd have had to leave the hammock. Which meant only one thing.

Someone had taken the book from me after I fell asleep.  
Cazien?

I didn't know what was more disconcerting. That I hadn't woken up when someone took something from me, or that it was Cazien who'd done it.

Shaking the feeling from my thoughts, I took advantage of the empty room and changed clothing. I refused to sleep in anything other than fully clothed; as uncomfortable as

breastbands were, it was better than being exposed around him.

Though he clearly had no problem removing his clothes around me.

Heat warmed my cheeks as the memory of his sun-kissed skin returned. His body continued the mastery his face promised, sculpted by years of combat until he was a honed weapon. Even during the short tussle, I could feel the strength coiled under his skin. If he'd wanted to truly best me, I'd never have escaped him so easily.

What I focused on as I pulled on my boots wasn't the beauty of his chest and stomach, or his thick arms. It was the silver scars under the smattering of dark chest hair recording his life with the sword.

Those scars proved more than anything else that Cazien Talon had earned his brutal reputation.

And I had more than one similar scar under my own tunic.

Someone, either Thames or Cazien, had left a basin and a pitcher of water on the table and I quickly cleaned my face. A plate of hard cheese, cured meats, fruit, and a roll was beside the basin. Rather than sitting and eating the entire thing, I pocketed the orange after shoving a piece of cheese in my mouth.

I left the room, holding the roll, and made my way up to the deck. I was never one for a full breakfast, and the ship was rocking enough that I didn't want to risk it all coming back up.

The sky was a bright blue, stretching out to the horizon to meet the sea in every direction. White clouds streaked

the sky, giving moments of shade when they blocked the sun. The Dark Sea itself was as placid as it could be on a calm day, which meant we sailed over waves high enough to feel the rise and fall of the ship.

My stomach twisted and I focused on the horizon, keeping myself balanced and willing the nausea away.

Honestly, I couldn't remember if I'd been sick in the bowels of the ship that brought me to Constinbul because of the sea or because of the fear and upheaval I'd experienced.

A screech sounded over the conversations of the sailors and many of us watched as a golden eagle dove towards the water. I watched in awe as the giant bird spread out its wings, shining with sunlight, as its talons snagged a fish from the water and pumped its wings to fly high once more. What was an eagle doing this far out to sea?

The answer came quickly as it wheeled around before landing at the top deck near the captain and the two Talon brothers. It landed nearest Gavret, hunching over to devour its meal. The bird must be Zypher.

A suitable assistant for a man known for his skills of hunting down any prey.

My gaze slid to Cazien beside him, who spoke with Captain Resuld. My breath caught as I took him in. He'd foregone a doublet, and his white shirt was unlaced, the sleeves pushed above his elbows. He rested his hand casually on the hilt of the sword buckled to the belt slung around his waist, keeping his shirt from rising with the breeze. His pants did nothing to hide his thick thighs,

strong and sure on the deck even as the ship lurched to the side and sent others stumbling.

But what really stole my breath was his face. The sun shone down on his loose hair, haloing him as he stood tall. His face was in profile to me but even still I could see the fierce joy on his face. This life—sailing across the sea on a quest suited him. I knew this with utmost certainty in the depths of my being.

Cazien Talon was not just a legendary warrior. He was a soul meant to adventure. This was not a man who could be found idle in a tavern, night after night, by the fire and listening to the tales of others.

Cazien Talon was alive. Alive in a way I'd always longed to experience.

He looked out, taking in every detail, no doubt, and when his face turned towards me, I was trapped under his steel gaze. I was bound by no iron, no ropes, no gags, yet I could not move or speak as our eyes met across the ship.

"Minerva," a voice said behind me.

I jumped, barely keeping back the shriek threatening to sound, hand going to my dagger.

It was Neil, though, another Hallows member. He wasn't the worst of the Hallows, but there were no saints among our ranks. He had the look of a scavenger, always ready to pounce when the hard work was done.

"Durnth's gathering us below. Says it's about the job."

I nodded, turning to follow Neil back down below the deck. I refused to look over my shoulder at Cazien, but I swore his eyes followed me into the dark.

The lower decks the Hallows and ship's crew slept in were cramped and half full of supplies. Three lanterns hung securely to the support posts, leaving half of the area in shadows. Durnth leaned against one of the posts, illuminated as if with a spotlight, and the rest of the Hallows fanned out around him, sitting on boxes or barrels or hanging in hammocks I'd expected above.

The men Durnth chose for this job were many I'd worked with before. They were reliable, and good with the sword. But like every other person who lived in the streets of Constinbul, their loyalty was to themselves first and gold second.

And the look Durnth gave me as I took my own seat on a wooden crate made me realize my boss was up to something.

"Minerva and I had a talk with the client last night, since she's sharing his room up there." A few of them snickered and I glowered at them. I knew better than to call Durnth out on the insinuation in front of the Hallows, so I stamped down the anger. He knew I might be sharing the room, but I'd never share Cazien's bed.

"Turns out, boys, we're after the lost treasure of King Xanu."

I'd expected more laughter, but instead greed took over the expressions around me.

"He's got a map, says it's real, and it'll lead us to it. He's promised a hundred gold pieces if we don't find it. If we do find it, every man can take as much gold and jewels as he can carry."

The Hallows let out a collective whoop and cheer. I shook my head, the idiots. Even if it was real, which I still doubted, it would mean the curse was real too. Apparently, the legendary wealth was tempting enough for Durnth to overcome his fear of magic.

“This will be the Hallows’ biggest score, but...” He trailed off and the others leaned forward as the anticipation built. Durnth always had a flair for the dramatics. He thrived on the clear admiration of his audiences. The only thing growing inside me was the certainty I wouldn’t like what he was about to say next. “But I have a plan that could make it even bigger. When the treasure is found, we’ll take it all for ourselves.”

“But it’s Cazien and Gavret Talon,” someone—I thought maybe Yaun—pointed out warily.

“Aye.” Durnth nodded, but he didn’t sound worried. “But they’re two men and we’re twenty. And when we get to Grotto, we’ll be spitting up. You’re the best Hallows, fighters and warriors who’ve got years of experience. Talons or not, we can take them down. These men are wealthy enough already. They can get anything they want, whenever they want. Cazien wants this treasure for the glory. But us? This treasure could make sure every one of us is as wealthy as a lord. Why should they get it all?”

Hellfire, Durnth, I thought sourly. Not even a full day had passed since we’d learned the nature of the job and Durnth was already looking to turn on the client and take the reward himself.

“And how do you propose we do this?” I asked, questioning Durnth in front of everyone. He might make me

pay for it later. But right now Cazien needed me, which meant Durnth needed me.

"Seriously," I kept speaking. "We might be twenty, but they've got at least another thirty with crew alone. And you're not foolish enough to underestimate the Talons themselves."

Durnth's grin was slow and vile. The dread within me increased tenfold as he set his sights on me.

"Because we have you, *darling*." He cooed the endearment and it sent ice through my veins. I clenched my fist, but didn't look away from him. "Cazien wanted you the moment you called him out yesterday morning. Why else would he kick his own brother out of his cabin and put you in there?"

I grit my teeth. "We had a deal."

"Oh, yes, I remember. A private cabin." Durnth nodded. "How convenient for him that the only private one is his own."

"I won't whore myself out for you," I snapped. "Never have, never will, Durnth."

"Min, Min, Min," he soothed. "You don't need to bed the man for this to work. All you'd need to do is let him think he's getting close to you. You're pretty enough any man here would tumble you, Cazien certainly. A few kisses are likely enough for him to trust you, and then when it's time, you'll be in the perfect position to take him out."

I opened my mouth to object but Durnth kept going, his face hardening.

"You'll do this, Minerva. You're a Hallow and these are my orders. You don't want to listen? Well, you know how I

deal with people who cost my men gold.”

My voice stuck in my throat as I looked at the men around me. There was a warning in every single pair of eyes watching me. If I didn’t agree, I’d meet their version of justice.

I had no reason to be loyal to Cazien, all he’d done so far was pay me thirty gold pieces, attack me, frustrate me, and confuse the hell out of me.

Durnth was my boss, and I wouldn’t tell him about the clue with the map. I could hold back some secrets.

I used to believe in honor, in doing the right thing. I believed people were good in nature. Then my father’s greed shattered my life and showed me how people really are.

Screw everyone else. The only person who I could ever count on was myself. Even if we never found the treasure, I’d still be two hundred gold richer and I could leave the rest of them behind.

“You’ll wait until we have the treasure in reach? I don’t want to miss out on the promised one hundred gold if it doesn’t exist.”

“Watch your tone, Minerva.” Durnth growled. “I’m not in the habit of risking gold, now am I?”

I raised my hands in surrender, still annoyed the Hallows were seriously considering turning. When Durnth decided I wasn’t going to raise any more objections, he turned back to the rest.

“Half of us will go with the inland group, the other half will stay on the boat. The lordling’s got some plan for the

ship to travel the coastline. If we find the treasure, word will be sent. Then the Hallows take over.”

Hums of approval filled the air around me, but I didn’t add to it. My new goal was to stay alive and get out of Aeaea on a ship across the Great Sea and enough gold in my pockets I’d sink if I went overboard.

Two hundred gold pieces would be enough I’d never have to work again if I lived frugally. I’d never have to steal or kill again. Or, better, get an apprenticeship with a mapmaker and finish my education.

I tuned out Durnth’s words as I considered how Cazien would react. If any of us went right to him and told him of Durnth’s plan, he’d kill us and feed us to the sharks without hesitation. It was the type of man he was and the rest of his family were the same. Their family rose from blood generations ago, each new generation of warriors only added to the death toll. They’d had all mercy bred out of them until what remained was Cazien.

A weapon, a weapon without mercy, without thought. A weapon forged with blood and death. A man where deep inside resided a monster so great it felled demons.

I grit my teeth. It wouldn’t matter if a Hallows went to him—Cazien would kill them for being connected.

Like he said last night, he trusted no one except Gavret.

I was dead if I agreed to betray Cazien, and I was dead if I didn’t. The only difference would be who held the blade.

I rose and Durnth cut off to stare at me. “Where you going? We ain’t done here.”

I raised an eyebrow. “All I need to know is I play besotted girl. I don’t care about the rest of the plan. I’ll do my part,

don't you worry, Durnth. So I may as well start now."

I strode away towards the ladder bolted in the middle to the ship. If Durnth ordered me back, I'd have to listen or face his wrath. But he didn't, which meant I'd claimed a small victory. One I'd likely pay for later, hopefully not with my life.

Despite telling him I planned to start right away, I couldn't bring myself to look for Cazien when I got to the main deck. Instead, I went to the railing and began to peel the orange I'd snagged from breakfast as I stared out across the sea.

It was aptly called the Dark Sea. This far out, the water was so dark blue as to nearly be black. At night, if there was no moon, it'd look like a void, hissing and growling as the invisible waves crashed against itself. I shuddered, and cast the peels into the waters. In a heartbeat, a wave sucked them down into the realm of Sedus.

"It's said the Dark Sea is the home of sirens who displeased Sedus."

I looked out the side of my eyes to see Cazien leaning casually next to me, his forearms resting on top of the rail. Even with the chilled salty spray in the air, I could still smell the warm spice of him, and the bold sage. Now he had another scent, the smell of warm sun and relaxation.

"Can't say I blame them," I said, looking back out to the sea. "I doubt Sedus is a good husband. And I'm sure many didn't wish to marry in the first place."

He inspected me, as if to see under my skin, past the wall there and all of my secrets. I thought of what I'd agreed to

do minutes ago. My stomach heaved, but this time I knew it had nothing to do with the roll of the ship.

"You're not married."

I snorted. "Neither are you."

I probably should've been more coy, more overt like the women in the taverns who sold their company. Before he could reply, I forced myself to face him, smiling softly.

"Why the treasure?" I asked, truly curious. "The fame? Glory? Wealth? I'd think Cazien Talon had enough of each to last a dozen lifetimes."

Conflict flashed in his eyes before he locked it down, putting an easy look on his face.

"Why not add finding the Lost King's treasure to my legacy?" He stretched his arms above his head and I let myself look my fill. He smirked when he caught me, and dammit, I still blushed. It only made his smirk grow.

"No, that's not it," I said, willing the heat in my chest to settle. I tilted my head, meeting his storm-blue eyes, narrowing my own. "Maybe for other people it would be. But something tells me there's something else you want. Something that would make the risk worth it."

His eyes crinkled, and his smirk softened into something secretive, a look I didn't think many people had the privilege of seeing.

"Maybe you're right, Minerva," he said.

I couldn't look away from him and it had nothing to do with Durnth's orders and everything to do with the gentle tilt of Cazien's lips. Embers were growing, the potential of a fire offered in the black between us. If the embers grew to

flames, it would consume one of us and I knew it wouldn't be him. Still, I couldn't step back.

When angry shouts sounded from behind us, I whirled, thankful for the rescue.

## CHAPTER FIVE



**K**olton, one of Captain Resuld's original crew members, was frog-marching another man whose name I didn't know towards us. The man looked terrified as he saw Cazien. He didn't even spare a look for me. He started to struggle away from Kolton, but Kolton kicked the back of his knee and sent him to the deck.

Everyone had stopped to watch the scene playing out.

"What's this about, Kolt?" Captain Resuld took the steps down from the top deck quickly. Cazien crossed his arms over his broad chest, his legs wide, and I realized he was prepared for a fight. He was still, terrifyingly so, a viper waiting for the perfect moment to strike. The tension had disappeared completely, dissolving into the sea spray.

Kolton kicked the man, and made a sound of disgust. "Found the bastard two bottles in. He was pissing below, into a barrel of fresh water."

Even the sea went silent as the charge spread across the deck.

The man whimpered, the sound of a dying beast. He looked up at the captain, his eyes bloodshot.

"It was an accident, Cap'n," he pleaded. "I didn't know it was the water. You gotta believe me."

Fresh water was worth more than gold on a ship—even on a trip as short as this. And he'd ruined at least a barrel of it.

"Is there no way to purify it?" I asked quietly. Cazien looked at me, seemingly to be the only one who heard.

"Yes," he said. "But he must face the consequence."

"No, no, no," the man begged, and the crew turned away from him. He reached out, trying to grab one of the men's pants, and the crew member lurched away as if he were contagious. As if touching him would drag him into the punishment.

"Captain?" Cazien looked at Resuld.

The man didn't speak much, I'd learned over dinner the night before. And it was the same case then. He approached the man, glaring down at the quivering mess.

"Todderick, you blasted drunk. You knew the rules I had about drinking on this ship. You've risked the lives of your fellow crew, and now the man whose gold you took will deliver the punishment."

Cazien strode forward, and Todderick fell back, scrambling away.

I'd seen executions before, and with the fear in Todderick's eyes, I knew what the consequence was. Cazien paid for this venture, so he had the right to perform it. The arrogant man who'd provoked me last night was gone, in his place was Cazien Demonbane.

Todderick lunged for a man—a Hallows—drawing the knife from the man's belt. It wasn't much, no longer than

five inches, but it seemed Todderick wouldn't go without a fight.

If the water was able to be purified, would Cazien still kill him?

Todderick held the knife out, his entire arm shaking, warning Cazien to stay back. The man lunged at Cazien, who stepped deftly aside. Cazien hadn't drawn his own blade yet, and a detached part of me wondered how he planned to kill the man.

Todderick slashed through the air, retreating around the ship as the crew scrambled away. When the two turned so Cazien now faced my side of the ship, I understood why.

Cazien's face was a statue of death. There was no battle lust, no drive for fighting. He had decided this man would die by his hand, and so it would happen.

A chill ran down my spine, like the touch of death, even as a spark of lust flared to life.

Todderick stumbled over a rope, and Cazien struck.

The man was almost unnaturally fast. Cazien grabbed a fistful of Todderick's collar, and as he pulled Todderick from the fall, his other hand went to the wrist of the hand holding the knife.

There was no grunt, no growl, nothing to indicate it was any effort to Cazien as he twisted Todderick's arm and sent the blade up under the man's sternum to his heart. Cazien's eyes fogged over with an unnatural black.

Todderick gasped, and Cazien released him, returning him to the fall. When Todderick hit the deck, the man's hand was still wrapped around the dagger he'd stolen.

Cazien stood over him, a silent sentinel, until the life had left Todderick. Then he crouched and pulled the dagger out, the slick sucking noise reaching my ears, and wiped the blade clean on the man's shirt. He rose, gripping the dead man's shirt. Most of the crew didn't watch as Cazien dragged the body across the deck and with a grunt of effort, at last, threw his body overboard.

Todderick's body hitting the water made me flinch. It should have been more monumental, a death like his. The sound should have echoed over the sea.

The crew should have been standing at attention, witnessing his pseudo burial. But other than a few looks, no one made a move to go to the railing and watch him sink into the water.

Cazien flipped the knife over in his hand, holding it by the blade as he offered it back to the man Todderick had taken it from. I turned away, hands gripping the rail as I stared at the small plume of blood in the sea. In moments we'd passed it and it was as if Todderick hadn't been on the ship at all.

Cazien had killed a man and it was as if he'd erased him from existence. Was there even anyone waiting for Todderick somewhere? Would someone mourn his loss?

I'd killed before, my hands weren't clean, but never so... coldly. So detached and efficiently. Every life I'd taken had been in a fight where it was either me or them.

Cazien returned to my side, his eyes clear enough I wondered if I'd imagined it. He kept distance between us, as if he knew I was struggling to understand what I'd learned about him in the short time we'd been on the boat.

Jaques, the first mate, a much more talkative man than the captain, joined us. Well, joined Cazien. I doubted he cared much for me—he'd been one of those who made the sign of Sedus when he realized a woman would be sailing with them.

"Sent Cormic down below to check the water supplies. We've got a talisman to purify it, so we won't have lost any water."

"Check every barrel, even the surplus at the other end of the ship," Cazien ordered. Jaques nodded and moved away, eyes narrowing as he saw me. I ignored the sign he made as he left.

The sea's sound had returned, the waves breaking harder against the hull as if in response to my agitation.

"The water can be purified and there is even extra if it couldn't have been." I didn't look at him as I spoke.

"And yet I still killed him," Cazien answered the implied question. He turned to face me, one arm leaning on the rail. I risked a glance at him. He looked no different than he had when we spoke earlier. There was no sign, nothing to show he'd taken a man's life. "Does that bother you?"

He sounded genuinely curious.

I didn't answer right away.

I'd seen Durnth kill as punishments before. Hell, he'd essentially threatened to kill me this morning if I didn't get close to Cazien. I'd agreed to kill Cazien when the time came, or at least try. I wasn't arrogant enough to think I could best a living legend.

"I've seen men die for their actions before," I answered at last, looking down at my hands. "There needs to be

consequences, I don't argue that."

"But?"

I looked at him. "Why does it always have to be death?" The question wasn't about Todderick's death. It was about the countless I'd seen killed on the streets, by the guards who were supposed to protect people, by Durnth. It was about the men who killed my mother and father.

Cazien stepped closer, and his eyes matched the color of the sea. Did he descend from Sedus, his only proof of the bloodline in those eyes?

"We live in a brutal world, Minerva," he said. His voice wasn't gentle, but there was no edge to it. "On a ship, water is vital for survival. Yes, we have a way to clean it and we do have more than enough for the trip. But if we allow a threat to survival to live, it stays a threat. It puts the entire crew at risk. And it shows weakness. Weakness cannot be allowed."

Durnth believed the same thing.

"Why must men always rule by strength and fear?" I grumbled, not really expecting an answer as I looked back out at sea.

"Because love can be lost so quickly." Then his voice was soft, and I risked a look at him. He was close again, but he wasn't looking at me anymore. "Love can be overcome by greed. Love can be used against people. Love is the most deadly thing in the world."

My eyebrows rose at his words and I had the strangest urge to place my hand over his. There was hurt buried deep under those words. Something raw and visceral, and yet again I was seeing another part of this dangerous man.

"Do you love someone?" I asked, gripping the rail to keep my hands in place.

He snorted, but I didn't quite believe it. When he looked at me again, the arrogant swagger from last night was back, his sinful grin on his lips.

"I don't love, darling. I fuck, I drink, I fight. But never love."

"Not even your family?" I nodded towards Gavret in challenge.

"That's different," he argued and I turned to him, crossing my arms in silent demand. He scrubbed his face, shoving his wind-tousled hair back. "Yes, I love my family. But they are not a weakness and I'm not a weakness to them. We are a family of steel and war. As children, we were trained to sacrifice each other if that's what victory required. I would let Gavret die, and he would let me die. Then we'd tear apart the world to avenge them."

I raised my eyebrows. "Sounds like a charming family."

Cazien shrugged. "It was how we were raised. Besides, we haven't encountered a situation yet where sacrifice was truly necessary. If we can get the other out, we do."

I didn't know what to say so I stayed quiet. The enormity of Durnth's request struck me then. This man, this killer, wouldn't be easy to get close to. He wouldn't be swayed by a few stolen kisses like Durnth assumed. Even if I did give myself to him, he'd never let me close enough to kill him. And, frankly, I didn't think he deserved to be killed in cold blood.

I didn't think anyone deserved to, despite how common it was.

"Come," he said, pushing away from the rail. "I want to go over the maps with you."

I followed him, and Durnth caught my eye as I walked past him. He was helping one of Resuld's men maintain the lines on the mast. He winked at me and I wanted to glare back. Durnth might believe he was smart enough to con Cazien Talon, but I seriously doubted it.

As we disappeared below and walked towards the cabin, I considered telling him then and there about Durnth's planned rebellion. Then I thought of Todderick and Cazien's own words. Mercy and weakness could not be allowed. If he let me live, it would send the wrong message to the rest of the world. It would say he was weak enough to let someone, specifically a woman, live despite being a part of the crew which had betrayed him.

No, Cazien Talon would not let me live even if I told him of Durnth's plans.

The truth of the matter weighed on my shoulders, almost heavier than the anxiety of seeing a map of Aeaea.

Cazien unfolded the outdated map, and then unrolled a current one. My heart lurched at the stamped compass rose, my fingers tracing over it. The compass was on top of a sun, half eclipsed by a moon, with three stars at each direction's point.

This was a map my father had produced.

Cazien didn't notice my reaction, he'd gone to the bookshelves and pulled out a dark bottle. After inspecting the label, he snagged two tumblers between his fingers and joined me at the table. By the time he was pouring a plum-

colored alcohol into the glasses, I'd schooled my face back into professional interest.

"Aeaea isn't a small island," he said, sliding one of the drinks towards me while he raised the other one. "But neither is it massive. How long would you and your father be out past the wall?"

I raised the glass, inhaling the sweet scent. It was wine, I realized, and I took a cautious sip. The smooth flavor coated my tongue, the hint of tannins only enhancing the flavor of bold fruit. It tasted like a warm autumn evening, before the promise of winter arrived. It made me want to curl up before a fire, devouring a novel as I sipped on the fruit and spiced wine.

"Good, isn't it?" Cazien was amused, but he wasn't teasing me. He was sharing the humor with me, as if he'd been surprised the first time he'd tasted it.

"It is," I admitted, taking another drink. Then I leaned forward, looking at the maps.

"So, what do you want me to look for? Aeaea has certainly changed in the ten years I've been gone."

He waved away the concern. "So long as you've got the sense of where we are, where we shouldn't go, and potential routes to use, that's all that matters." He took a drink, looking at me over the glass. I swallowed, shoving the heat his look conjured back down into the dark. "Grotto most certainly has changed, but from what I hear, outside of the wall has been left alone beyond the occasional explorations."

"They always were afraid of angering the gods," I murmured, pulling the maps closer to compare. "My

mother argued with my father about taking me along on his trips beyond the wall."

"Did she? I doubt she's happy with her daughter working for Durnth."

I stilled, staring hard at the wall depicted around the city of Grotto. He was right; my mother would be horrified to know I was in a gang. She'd wanted me to marry well, perhaps even into nobility. We were wealthy, thanks to my father's trade. Wealthy enough my dowry would have enticed a lesser noble to consider me.

"She's dead," I said matter-of-factly, pushing away the memory of her.

"My condolences." It was strange, but I believed him to be sincere. "And your father?"

"The same," I said and moved to change the subject. Tapping the ancient map, I asked, "Where did you get this?"

He leaned back in the chair, his legs stretched out and crossed at the ankles. No man should look as handsome as him. He had dark scruff along his jaw having not shaved while at sea, and all it did was highlight his ruggedness and make his lips look even softer.

I wondered what they would feel like. A primal, instinctual part of me knew his kiss would devour me. He was not a man you gave your firsts too, and yet Durnth all but ordered me to. I was staring too long and when I pulled my gaze back to his eyes, I found a sensuous warmth in them. And the faintest suggestion the warmth could be stoked from spark to inferno.

I forced my physical response back, my cool mask taking over again. What was it about this man that made it

impossible for me to control myself?

I raised a haughty eyebrow, daring him to answer.

"Everyone has their secrets, darling." His voice had dropped an octave and it took everything to not respond physically to it.

"If you want to know, you'll have to trade me something in return."

Wariness gripped me. Bargaining with this man would be like bargaining with the fair folk. No doubt he'd twist the words until he gained everything and I was left nothing.

I was still curious, though. I took another drink, leaning back in my chair in a mirror of him. "And what would you want?"

The left side of his lips lifted into the smallest smile. "Everything," Cazien said. "But I would settle for a kiss."

His eyebrow rose in challenge, and we were in a fight, I realized. There were no blades to strike with, no violence to endure. This match used words and feelings. How far were either of us willing to go to accomplish our goals.

He'd kill for his, but what of his mind or heart would he give? What would I sacrifice to start my life over?

I knocked back the rest of the wine, the warmth of the alcohol sliding down my throat to curl in my stomach. I blamed the wine for the heat within me as I leaned towards him.

Cazien leaned forward, his elbow resting on his leg, the tumbler hanging loosely in his hand.

We were close, close enough I could feel his warm breath on my face. I wondered if he'd taste like the wine. I studied his face, taking every hard angle in, each elegant

brow, his thick dark lashes above his storm-blue eyes. His lips were soft, a more experienced woman might even describe them as pillow-y. There was no curl of arrogance on them now, nor a smirk of amusement. They were still, as he waited to see what I'd do.

I raised my eyes to his as I brought my fingertips under his chin. Could he hear my heart racing? Could he tell how he affected me? Could he sense the warmth growing in my core that had nothing to do with the wine he'd poured me?

He looked to my lips before meeting my eyes again. The black of his pupils spread outward, consuming the blue of his eyes. He wanted me to kiss him. Even innocent in the ways of the body, I knew this. I smiled.

"Go to hell, Cazien."

## CHAPTER SIX



**I**t was as if our exchange set the standard for the next few days. Every chance Cazien had to send a barb my way, I parried it with my own. Insults and insinuations became a strange way of flirting. I ignored Durnth's glares, and Cazien passed them off as Durnth not wanting his client to be pissed.

I honestly began to forget what Durnth wanted to do. Because the truth was, I started to like Cazien. Oh, he was arrogant and crass and frustrating. There was always a promise of danger lurking underneath his smirk, and the fire in his eyes could turn to rage in a moment.

Since Todderick's execution, no one had stepped a foot out of line. Or if they had, Captain Resuld or First Mate Jaques handled it.

The rest of the Hallows split duties with the ship's crew, but I was never assigned anything. Whenever I'd volunteered, Durnth would tell me to stick to my duty—and I'd go back to the cabin and stare at the bloody maps again.

The day before we were to arrive in Grotto, the skies had turned gray. The waves rose and the horizon promised a

storm. Conditions only worsened until all but the necessary crew were sent down below deck.

Which meant I was stuck with Cazien in the cabin. It wouldn't have been a problem, had my mood not turned foul from what awaited me tomorrow.

"The Kanoi, they interest me," Cazien spoke up from where he lounged on the bed. If he could avoid sitting upright in a chair, he would. For all that he was a pillar of a man, he lounged like a sated cat. He took a bite of the peach Thames had brought with dinner, and the drop of juice rolling down his chin made me want to growl.

How dare he be so relaxed, so unintentionally desirable, when I prepared to face my past? I threw a cloth at him. "Clean up your face unless you like looking like a pig."

He snatched the cloth from the air before it could fall short of the bed and frowned at the venom in my voice.

"Who pissed in your wine?"

I refused to look at him. "If I tell you, would you kill them?" The map hadn't changed since the first time I'd seen it. It was nearly impossible to focus when memories pressed against the vault I'd locked them in.

"I'd kill anyone who upset you, darling."

I snarled. "You're a cad."

"And a rake, if you'd believe what the mothers of nobility say."

"That's why you're not married. No honorable woman would have you."

"One almost did."

The bite had disappeared from his voice and I finally looked over at him. He'd swung his legs over the side of the

bed, and he rested his elbows on his knees, staring down at the half-eaten peach in his hands.

His dark hair was pulled back into a haphazard knot on top of his head. Light from the lanterns, one at the table in front of me, the other on the bolted shelf near the headboard, cast harsh shadows over him. It should have given him a sinister appearance, the planes of his face covered in harsh shadows, but instead it made him look lost. As if he'd retreated into the shadows because he felt too vulnerable in the light.

It seemed I wasn't the only one with bad memories.

"What happened?" My voice was hardly louder than the worsening waves outside.

"She's dead." He shook his head, and looked up at me, retreating behind an easy grin. But the shadows were still in his eyes. "So, Kanoi?"

I shrugged, letting him change the subject. "They've been on Aeaea as long as anyone can remember. They're both Aeanean and not. I was taught when Agni created the wall to protect Grotto from his wrath, the Kanoi refused the protection. They wouldn't leave their villages. So when his fires rained over the island during the war with Sedus, many didn't survive."

"And their homes used to be where the barren canyons are?"

I nodded, glancing at the map. "They're a harsh people. Their language is close enough to Aeanean, but like them, there's an edge to it. My father was fascinated with them."

"What happened to him?"

I studied Cazien. His voice matched the quiet of mine earlier, but was this question another knife of his seeking any chink in my armor?

"The Kanoi didn't kill him, or my mother, if that's what you're asking," I said, hiding behind a light tone. "Their deaths came about from people who considered themselves refined and civilized." There was a bitterness in my tone, souring the pleasant dinner I'd eaten earlier.

Neither of us spoke for a long moment. The ship began to rock and sway harder as it fought through the growing storm. The portholes were black, and the white crests of the sea would slam against them at times. On top of the sea, the rain came down harsh on the deck above, pummeling the wood and covering the room with its noise.

The ship was well maintained, but even it could not withstand the forces of the storm completely, and rainwater dripped down from the ceiling near the door. Neither Cazien nor I had bothered to do anything about it. So long as it wasn't getting our respecting sleeping spots wet, it didn't matter. I certainly had slept in less comfortable positions, and no doubt he had too.

At least I wasn't down below with the rest of the Hallows. From the grumbling through the closed door, it sounded like there was a good six inches of water sloshing around down there.

"It should be surprising how many civilized people have blood on their hands yet act otherwise."

"Do you not count yourself among the civilized?" I tried for a more jovial tone. I didn't quite manage it, but he acted as if I did.

"If you're asking if I know which spoon or fork to use at a formal dinner, darling, it must shock you to hear I can be perfectly respectable when the situation calls for it."

I snorted. "I don't really see you wearing velvet coats and playing court."

"I only do when I must—and when Brannen bribes me appropriately."

"That's Lord Talon, yes? Your eldest brother?"

Cazien stood, taking a moment to steady himself with the undulating floor, then made his way to the shelf and pulled another bottle of liquor out without inspecting it. He poured two glasses, those civilized manners of his appearing, and handed me one. I took it and sniffed it. The woody oak scent barely covered the tang of alcohol. It went down smoother than I'd expected, though, when I took a sip.

"If you've set your eyes on marrying a lord, darling, I assure you my brother desires to marry less than I do."

I snorted. "Do any of you Talons want to marry a human? I thought you'd all given your hearts to battle."

Cazien pantomimed a swoon. "The goddess Victory has stolen my soul, and what great lengths I will go to taste the sweetest drop of her lips." I laughed, and he grinned, saluting me with his drink before downing half of it. He dropped into the chair, heavier than intended, as the chair dipped with the rest of the ship. "To answer your question, I don't think we're necessarily opposed. Brannen must at some point, and Gavret as well, being the second son. Not to mention that Brannen's had a devil of the time marrying off our sister."

"Oh?" This was the most personal conversation we'd had yet, and the one with the least number of insults. Maybe. I shot him a smirk. "I'd think a woman would be eager to escape a family of brutes. Even if it meant marriage."

He barked out a laugh. "Morgan may not have been in battles, but she's trained with us since she was seven. It was the only way our mother could get her to practice needlework or whatever tosh makes a suitable wife."

I cocked my head. "My mother taught me the same. We weren't noble, but she had hopes for me. Needlework comes in handy when you have to repair your own clothing."

He nodded. "Oh, yes. I'm handy with a needle. I can sew both clothing and skin."

The liquor must have stripped away my reservations. It was the lightest I'd felt in a really long time. There was a risk in flirting with a man like Cazien, but I found a freedom in it too.

"So, what you're saying is," I began, my voice husky in an unfamiliar way, "you're excellent wife material?"

I expected a laugh, full and loud like the other times I'd challenged him. While the humor was plain on his face, he didn't laugh. Instead, he leaned forward, closing the distance between us. We hadn't been this close since that second day, all of our barbs and quips sent from a safe distance.

"I would make a wonderful wife, darling."

His eyes dropped to my lips and his nostrils flared as I subconsciously wetted them.

"Why do you call me that?" Our voices had dropped to a whisper, hardly heard above the storm battering the ship outside.

"Because I like the way you look at me when I say it."

I raised an eyebrow. "With annoyance?"

The left side of his lips quirked up, like he knew a secret I didn't. "With challenge. No one, especially women, look at me the way you do. The only people who look at me the way you do are on the battlefield."

Cazien's eyes moved to the strands of my hair that'd fallen out of its tie, and I held stock-still as he brought his hand up to twine it between his rough fingers.

I wanted to pull away.

I wanted to bury my fingers in his hair and crush his lips against mine.

I wanted him to stoke the fire building in my core, the fire building since we met outside of the Hallows' building.

I wanted to reach for my blade and hold it to his throat, a reminder I was not to be conquered like another battle.

His eyes met mine, so dark I was certain they matched the angry sea on the other side of the wooden walls. It was me who looked at his lips, the only thing soft and inviting about him.

The heat curled in my core, growing from embers to flames, and when I met his gaze, the same heat reflected there.

A thrill went through a part of me. Cazien "Demonbane" Talon, brutal and fierce warrior, a man others fled from, wanted me. And I wanted him too. My inexperience crashed

over the heat in my blood, cooling it as my nerves reasserted themselves.

"I've never done this," I confessed, wishing I could break his gaze but I was held captive.

His eyes widened and I expected him to pull away, to laugh and mock my innocence. I steeled myself for his rejection.

Instead, he released my hair and cupped my jaw. His hand was so large, his fingers disappeared into my hair even as my chin rested in his palm. His hand was rough with calluses earned from wielding weapons, and I swore the friction set my skin ablaze.

"Never?" His voice was thick, like he struggled to get it out. But there was not a single note of mockery in it. Instead, it sounded almost like he was in awe.

I bit my lip and shook my head gently. His thumb stroked my cheek, and I gave in, leaning into his touch.

"I'd have guessed men fell at your feet as you walked by, head held like a goddess of war and beauty."

I glared at him, but the pleasure of his compliment took all the heat from it. "You don't have to lie to me."

"But I'm not," he said, making me pause. His thumb never stopped moving, and I swore he was deep inside me, stroking a part of me I'd never known. "The first time I met you, I knew you were beautiful and full of so much fire. And when you threw that dagger between my legs, I wanted to beg you to do it again."

"You're mad," I whispered. Even with the madness, I was enthralled.

"Perhaps," he admitted, looking back down at my lips, then back to me as if seeking permission.

I didn't move, I didn't breathe. He leaned forward, impossibly slow, and my eyes fluttered closed as his lips whispered against mine. When I didn't pull away, or more likely try to stab him, his lips met mine again. He used more pressure, slanting his mouth against mine even as he cradled my jaw in his hand.

He overwhelmed me with sensation, his lips as soft as I'd imagined, the spice and sage clinging to him was all I could smell. He consumed my world in his kiss. So when his tongue traced the seam of my lips, I gasped, and he deepened the kiss.

Cazien tasted like the dark amber liquor we'd shared, and the sweet peach he'd had. There was something else in his taste, something addicting. It's what prompted me to respond, as hesitant as I was.

My tongue met his and felt his quiet hum of approval. I should have been ashamed of the lust spiking through me, but I couldn't be. His tongue slipped back, and I leaned forward, unwilling to lose him yet. Instead of pulling away though, he'd coaxed me into exploring him, inviting me to slip between his own lips.

I moved, tentatively resting my hand on his thigh to steady myself as we kissed. His thigh was thick, solid as the mast of the ship and the muscles taut. His other hand moved to my waist, and I shuddered as the fire within me became overwhelming.

I wanted his hands on me, I wanted my hands on him. I needed more.

Cazien pulled away, the blue of his eyes nearly nonexistent, and his face was full of hunger.

I made to move, to slide myself against him and take his mouth back with my own. He dropped his other hand to my waist, holding me in place. His breath was haggard, the first time I'd seen him remotely out of breath and it was all because of me.

"We should stop," he said, his voice rough like the stubble of his cheeks against my skin.

"And if I don't want to?" My need made me bold.

He growled, and I wanted to purr like a cat at the sound. But his hands kept me in my own chair, and he narrowed his eyes at me.

"Minerva, I'm trying not to be a bastard here," he said, his voice recovering. "And if you kiss me again, I would very much be a bastard."

I wasn't deterred so easily, not after a small taste of the pleasure I knew he could bring. I trailed my finger down his throat until I could rest my palm above his heart. To my fierce pleasure, his was racing as quickly as my own.

"And if I said I didn't mind you being a bastard?"

He groaned, his fingers digging into my skin as his eyes closed. When they opened again, they burned. "I want to lay you on this table and devour you, Minerva," he said, and my heart and lust leapt. "I want to taste every inch of your skin. But if I put my mouth on you one more time tonight, I couldn't stop there. And even if you think you want that right now, I'd feel like the king of bastards when you couldn't look at me tomorrow."

I wanted to argue with him, gods, how I wanted to. But he was right. I let these new sensations overwhelm logic, I'd began to let my heart out of its cage.

A boom of thunder had me pulling away from him, like the storm itself was reminding me what I'd agreed to do to this man. What I might have to do to have any chance at leaving my past behind once and for all.

I couldn't let him kiss me again, not when it made me want to melt against him.

Clearing my throat, I nodded. "You're right. This shouldn't have even happened."

He frowned, but I cleared my face, hiding behind a mask of indifference. "I think I'll turn in, since we have a long day tomorrow." He didn't stop me as I rose, his hands sliding away from my waist. I couldn't look at him as I marched towards my side of the room and slipped off my boots. I tucked my cloak around me as I curled into the hammock, facing the blank wall.

Tomorrow, I'd be in the place my life was rent to pieces. Where my parents had died and I'd had my eyes opened to the cruelty of the world. I'd help find the Lost King's treasure, betraying Cazien, or I'd take the warrior's two hundred gold and set out across the Great Sea.

I had no intention of lowering my walls for a man, especially not Cazien Talon.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



**G**rotto hadn't changed much from what I remembered. I'd slept fitfully the night before, plagued with dreams of this place and of Cazien's lips. For the first time, I was out of the cabin room before Cazien had woken, unable to be below while the city approached on the horizon.

Our shared room had been lit by the soft gray of the predawn light, and I had lingered for a moment—short enough I could pass it off if he woke. It'd thrown me, how peaceful and soft he looked asleep. He looked his age, a man who hadn't even reached his third decade. With his storm-blue eyes hidden by sleep, there appeared to be no ghosts haunting him.

He looked like a nobleman's son, and not like a man who'd faced a demon and won. And his lips... his lips had been so soft, so inviting, so hungry against my own...

I forced my feet to move, lest I consider doing something entirely rash and stupid. Like try to kiss him awake. If he was anything like me, he'd be sleeping with a dagger within reach and I could find it at my neck or buried in my side.

When dawn came, I stared at Grotto, a city I'd once loved and never conceived leaving.

The city was the main and only port of Aeaea. Named aptly, Grotto was set in a protective bay, the water gentle compared to the surrounding Dark Sea. A natural barrier of the deepest black rock, an extension of the wall itself, traveled into the sea, encircling the bay save for a gap large enough to fit trading vessels.

"Do you think Agni really made the wall?"

I looked over my shoulder to where Gavret had appeared. The man was too silent for someone of his size. I shrugged, looking to the wall and the towering rocks in the sea surrounding the island.

"That's what the priests say."

Gavret stood next to me, his hands resting easily on the rail. He looked so much like his brother, but there was something more feral in his features. He was known as the Hunter, and had the same predatorial gaze in his eyes as his golden eagle.

"For such a remote island, there are many legends of the gods around it." He didn't seem to be asking anything but I nodded nonetheless. It was true, there were many legends considering the gods. But how else could one explain the unnatural wall rising up and around the city protecting it from the wrath of the volcano? Not that it had erupted in the last two hundred years, but the legends rang with enough truth despite the age.

I'd been outside of the wall enough times with my father that I'd seen the signs myself. Nothing grew on the wall, so

even a child could see the ripples of molten rock accumulated over time.

"It's said that Agni favored those in Grotto because they did not turn against him in his war against Sedus." I pointed to stone pillars rising from the sea. "It's said that those were the lances he rained down against Sedus's creatures from the volcano."

Gavret frowned with consideration, before looking at me with a mischievous grin. "Has anyone ever tried to transverse them?"

I snorted, shaking my head at the folly. "Many times. When a handful of nobles lost their sons to an attempt, the governor made it illegal. It still happens, of course, but they were forced to begin outside of the wall and view of the guards."

"Reckon we should give it a try, Gav?"

We both turned to see Cazien sauntering towards us, hand resting on the sword now strapped to his side. He'd dressed more formally than he had the entire trip, in an elegant black jacket with golden clasps down the right side, black pants and knee-high boots polished until they reflected the morning sun. He'd even pulled back half of his hair into a bun.

It should have looked unkempt, with how sharp his outfit was, but combined with the dark stubble on his face, it made him look riveting. I suddenly felt underdressed with my simple green tunic and brown pants. I grew angry at myself for letting him get under my skin and held on to it.

"I forbid you from attempting until you've paid me what you owe," I snapped out. Cazien and Gavret seemed

unflustered.

“Of course not, darling.” He said the endearment differently. Or maybe it was me who heard it wrong. Gavret mentioned observing the docking and left to join Resuld on the top deck as the captain navigated the ship into Grotto’s bay.

“Do you have any suggestions on where to board for the evening?”

“Outside of the wall?” I muttered and, was that concern in his eyes as he cocked his head at me? His attention should be on the four-foot thick black stone walls we were passing between, or the bustling city whose sounds we could hear echoing across the water now that we were out of the Dark Sea.

“Why didn’t you want to come here?”

I gritted my teeth, looking down at the cerulean water. It was so clear here, as if Sedus’s influence had been barred by the wall. There was life under the water—colorful fish and reefs, even a pair of turtles and a shark zipping under the boat.

“It doesn’t matter,” I said, stealing a look up at the docks. They were approaching too fast for me, much faster than we could have traveled. I knew it was my fear, though.

“It does if it affects you doing your job.”

I tore my eyes from the dock, so close to us now, and glared at Cazien. I refused to look at his lips, to let myself remember how it felt to have his tongue teasing mine, how he felt against me.

“It won’t. Jacob’s Cradle, it was an inn with a good reputation when I was here last.”

I was saved from further discussion when the deck exploded with activity as the crew prepared for docking. I stayed out of the way, waiting for the gangplank to be heaved down to the dock. With a resolute look at Cazien, I shouldered my packs and stomped down the ramp.

Bile burned my throat as I pushed through the crowded dock, keeping close attention on my pockets and bags. I may no longer be a pickpocket, but I hadn't lost my skills at stopping them.

Jaques passed me with a glower when I stopped at the cross section. He went to the port master's steward for the dock, logging our manifest. I stepped forward, right into the path of a massive man, a wooden crate on his shoulder.

"Watch it," he snarled and kept moving.

I whirled away, pushing myself towards the end of the dock and into the city itself. I'd been about to demand I be listed as someone else, anyone else. Or, hell, struck from the manifest completely.

Perhaps I could sneak back down to the port master's office and strike my name from the record before anyone could read it.

I could be paranoid, but already the morning sun was blasting its rays over the wall and into Grotto. Was it the sweat rolling down my neck or was it someone watching me? There was no way word could have traveled about my arrival. No way *they* could know Minerva Remon, the girl who escaped and cost them money, had returned to their stronghold.

Not even the two hundred gold I'd been promised could pay off what they'd expected to get for me. The precious

virgin daughter, newly bleeding, and trained in cartography and all things a wife would need. There were many men willing to pay for such a young wife, and I'd escaped before their product could be delivered.

One of my captors, Soal—I'd never forget their names—had loathed being unable to strike me when I resisted. Torun, the one in charge, had refused to let anyone strike me lest his client find fault with me. I was saved from the beatings, and after I'd bitten a few, they stopped trying to touch me. Oh, never to take my precious, oh-so-valuable virginity.

And when they hadn't fed me for the entire trip? Torun had laughed and said men preferred the baby fat gone from their child brides. It was easier to pass them off as older that way.

My skin crawled, as if once again covered in the filth of the ship and cage I'd spent over a week in, dress torn from my struggles against their disgusting advances.

By the time they dragged me into Constinbul, I'd left my innocent childhood behind and escaped into the city with Soal's blood coating my teeth.

I hoped I'd marked the bastard. I hoped he was dead.

Even in the dark memories of this place, other—happier ones—began to rise. The scent of grapes, olive oil, and fish with spices and citrus drove back my pain.

Grotto, for all I hated the last time I'd seen it, was once my beloved home.

Its people hadn't changed, tanned skin, under gowns or tunics in the color of spring, crowded the streets. The walls

of every building were white, reflecting the mighty sun, with designs to honor the gods painted in cobalt blue.

It was a city of life, and happiness, of light and laughter. Children ran in the streets, well clothed and fed. Merchants didn't break wrists or cut off hands if one of them tried to snag a date or orange. People knew each other in this city, children called out their family's names, the debt going to their parents.

Thankful I'd avoided breakfast, I pushed on, keeping my eyes open but head down all the same. I was clearly an outsider, but so long as I didn't look towards my old home, so long as I stayed on the main streets, I could pass for another traveler.

Hooves clopping against the cobbled streets had me turning, a frown on my face. Cazien nodded to me, before smirking at a woman with burnished gold hair, who looked at him in awe.

I wanted to smack her.

"Why are you riding?"

"Why not? You could, if you wanted to."

I looked past him to see the roan.

"I thought Gavret was staying on the ship?"

"He is," Cazien said, tilting his hips forward and getting the horse to walk again. "But Cian here would have been miserable still on the ship. And since we will need mounts, I figured you could ride her. If you know how."

"I do." I kept beside him, the streets becoming less crowded as we pushed on. "We're near the inn," I said. He followed, and I shoved down everything other than looking

as inconspicuous as a woman walking next to a mounted warrior could.

Because this Cazien was the warrior, the Demonbane. He still wore his fine clothing, but now he had more than his sword—which was again strapped along the side of his mount. He had daggers on either side of his waist, and a bandolier like my own, with more knives sheathed between its pockets. I had little doubt he had even more blades concealed under those clothes, the steel being warmed by his skin.

“What’s your horse’s name?” I asked, turning my attention back to finding Jacob’s Cradle. It shouldn’t be more than two streets away.

“Nixus,” Cazien answered, a hint of pride in his voice. “She’s been with me for three years now. Other than my brothers, there’s no one else I’d rather have at my back. And half the time, I’d choose her over them.”

I looked back at him as we turned down the narrow street. It was practically empty, but there was the fountain farther down. If memory served, Jacob’s Cradle would be there. His tone had been impressively even after he said the mare’s name. And his face had resumed the expression he’d held the first time I’d met him.

It wasn’t the man who’d kissed me the night before. I should have been surprised, but I wasn’t. I was relieved. A sense of nervousness that had nothing to do with being back in Grotto disappeared and I walked taller.

“Here’s the inn.”

It didn’t look much different than the rest of the buildings facing the small square. White walls, with cobalt

blue shutters on rows of windows, flung open to let in the breeze from the bay. When the sun was higher, they'd close the shutters, trapping the cooler air inside. The other businesses were a clothier and a supply store. The final, fourth side of the square had a set of massive wooden doors propped opened, and the scent of clean hay and horses drifted into the air around us.

"Convenient," he said, nodding towards the other two stores.

I shrugged. "It was one of the reasons I suggested this place. How many rooms do we need?"

"The men can double up, or if they have a dormitory set up, I'll rent it. These two are the only two horses for now."

"Grooms should know where to find pack animals," I said, moving towards the door of the inn.

The shops weren't the only reason I chose this place, though it was convenient to not need to hike through the city in search of the majority of supplies. Jacob's Cradle was an inn that my father never did business in. Now I wondered if it was because he couldn't conduct his other, more lucrative, business in this area.

The inn had a tavern on the bottom floor, the opposite wall to the entrance had large windows and we'd climbed high enough that the view was of the bay and the Dark Sea beyond. There were three tables that had people, one looked like a family, the other two were clearly tradespeople. The mother gave me a friendly smile as she tried to distract the baby in her arms and get her older child to eat.

A man in his older years, grayed hair and beard nicely trimmed, walked out from behind the counter with an easy gait.

"Welcome to Jacob's Cradle. Do you need a room?"

"Several, if you have them," I answered. "We'll have a total of twenty in our company, but we can double up. If you have a room with multiple bunks, we'd take that too."

He looked uneasy, his lip tilting with regret. "I've got one room available, and the only room with space for that many men is above the stable across the way."

"We'll take it," Cazien said as he came up behind me.

The man's expression turned from jovial to wary. "I don't want trouble here, sir."

Cazien inclined his head. "Nor will you have it. We'll be here for one night, and I'll pay upfront for both the quarters, food, and two tankards of ale per man in my company with dinner."

The innkeeper narrowed his eyes, looking between us. "That's going to be expensive. How do I know I won't regret this?"

Cazien reached into a pocket on his bandolier and pulled out a coin pouch and a ring I hadn't seen before.

"Let me know if that's not enough," he said, handing the pouch over. He held up the ring, and a signet was carved in the shape of a falcon in flight. "I'm Cazien Talon, second brother to Lord Talon, Duke of Ontalya. You will keep this until we depart. If we prove unsatisfactory guests, or disappear without paying the bill, send this along with a missive to Lord Talon and he will cover any debts by double."

I don't know what the man looked more surprised by: that before him stood a legendary warrior everyone in the room had heard of based on the sudden silence, or the fact he was being offered a signet ring from the man as collateral.

"Of course, my lord," the man accepted, gingerly taking the ring. Cazien held it back and the man flinched.

"No my lords, please. My brother is the lord," he said, enough humor in his voice to take out any bite.

"Runners will be delivering supplies for our venture. See to it they're kept safe? And a bath sent to the room, we've spent the last week on a ship and I fear I'll offend the lady's senses."

The innkeeper accepted the ring with a bow, promising everything would be seen to. I made to move past Cazien, intent on heading to the stables to pick out a bunk when he grabbed my arm.

I glared up at him, and the only change to his hard expression was a raise of an eyebrow. A move that should not have affected me the way it did and, damn him, now all I could think about was kissing him again.

"Where are you going?"

I tried to tug my arm away, but I may as well have been encased in a wall for all he moved. "Getting the first choice of bunks, then a bathhouse."

"Darling," he purred, his expression turning into something hard but with a wall of heat behind it. "You can't believe I'd make you sleep out in the stable with the rest of those men after keeping you all to myself for the last week?"

I flattened my lips, looking behind him towards the people seated at tables. Everyone was pointedly ignoring us, and there'd be no help from them. Damn the man and his reputation. Was there nowhere on this side of the Great Sea people hadn't heard of him?

One look at him and I knew arguing was pointless. "Fine." I pulled my arm back and this time he let me go. "But I get to bathe first."

The innkeeper returned, key in hand and gave directions to the room we'd procured. Cazien preceded me up the stairs and I did my damnedest not to admire his form. Like arguing earlier, the effort was pointless. I repressed a sigh and Cazien looked over his shoulder, as if he knew what I was thinking, and the damned man winked.

The sooner we were out of the city and I could focus on finding whatever path the map suggested, the better. Then maybe I could distract myself from Cazien.

## CHAPTER EIGHT



I had a problem, I realized as I stared down at the very inviting bath the innkeeper's staff had brought in. The wooden tub dominated the room, and it was a good thing there was only a single bed and a table with two chairs in the room. It wasn't a large room, but it would be comfortable once the tub was removed.

"Well?" Cazien's blank façade had disappeared the moment we were alone again, and now he very much knew what my problem was. "Aren't you going to get in before the water cools off?"

I scrunched my face at him over my shoulder. "Turn around."

He scoffed. "Really? I promise you, darling, I do have admirable self-control."

You're not the only one I'm afraid of, I thought. When I continued to stare at him, he let out an affronted sigh and turned his back to me.

"I should thank you," he said. "This blank wall is a much better view."

I stripped down quickly, not trusting him entirely to not steal a peek. Dipping my toe in to test the heat, I climbed in and sank into the water until it nearly reached my shoulders. It meant my knees poked out, but better than my breasts.

"You can turn around, so long as you promise not to look."

Cazien turned, and I blushed—my face hotter than the water I sat in—as he smirked at me. He looked between me and the table and the bed before toeing off his boots and sitting up against the headboard.

I wondered if he'd claim the bed and I'd make do with a bedroll on the floor? Or maybe this display of gentlemanly behavior would continue and he'd take the floor?

Or maybe we'd share...I slipped under the water, soaking my hair as if I could wash away the thought. When I came back up, I grabbed the soap and started attacking my hair. It was dark against my skin, plastered to my shoulders until I lathered it with the soap.

I refused to look at Cazien as I bathed.

The heat of the water and the fragrant citrus oils of the soap were silk against my skin and I craved to linger. I would have, had he left the room. But no, despite refusing to look at him, I could feel him there, watching me.

Finished faster than I wanted, I scowled at the two inn-provided towels on the table. Either I asked him to hand me one, and risked him getting an entire look at me, or I asked him to close his eyes while I grabbed one myself.

Cazien made the decision before I could, and rose from the bed in a fluid motion, and took the three steps to the

table. But instead of turning to face me as he brought me the towel, he kept his back to me.

I snatched the towel out of his hand and rose, wrapping it around me before even stepping out of the bath.

“Thank you.” I did have manners after all.

“You’re welcome,” he said as he went back to the bed.  
“Now you’ll simply have to decide how to get dressed.”

When I glared at him, he already had his eyes closed but his mouth turned up in a grin. Digging through my packs, I yanked out the first tunic and thick leggings I found. I should have found the breastband, but I had no plans of leaving Jacob’s Cradle until it was time to go beyond the wall.

“Done.” I had my head tilted forward, toweling off my thick hair and squeezing the water out of it. It was long enough that I’d have to get Jenny to cut it for me when I got back. It struck me then; I might never see her again—one of the few people I’d consider a friend. Actually, the only person.

Maybe I wouldn’t sail across the Great Sea from Grotto. Especially if Durnth’s plan worked and I had more treasure than I could spend.

Even if it meant turning on Cazien. I looked towards him

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“What are you doing?” I shrieked, clutching the damp towel to my chest. He’d stripped down to his trousers, and he paused as he undid the laces.

“You don’t need to turn your back on my account.” He finished unlacing his trousers and I whirled around fast

enough my damp hair slapped me in the face as he shoved them down. “You’re more than welcome to look.”

Instead of looking, I sat on the bed, looking straight ahead as I twisted my hair into a braid. Sitting where he had, though, meant I smelled hints of sage and spice over the citrus oils from the bath.

“So, what do you make of the passage with the map?”

Without thinking, I looked over at him. To my relief though, most of him was lowered in the water. The water hardly reached halfway up his chest, and his knees were almost comically high out of the bath. It would be funny, if he didn’t look utterly relaxed, his head tipped back, his dark hair hanging loose and damp.

I would have preferred seeing him naked to this. I remembered Tamera telling me about how she’d fallen in love with her husband, and how she’d known he was the one for her when simple things were sensual because it was him.

My stomach twisted. My core burned, but this was a man I planned to betray if his theory was correct. I couldn’t love him—even if he were capable of it.

“About Sedus and Agni battling?”

He nodded, and reached for the same soap I’d used. Hypnotized, I watched as he ran the bar down over his thick arms. “Don’t forget the desolation.”

Swallowing hard, I returned my gaze to the blue shutters. We’d need to close them soon unless we wanted to swelter in the heat. Until then, I kept my eyes on the Dark Sea in the distance.

"What do you know of the religious history of Aeaea?" I asked.

"The basics," he answered before the water sloshed as he dipped under to rinse himself off. When he came back up, he continued. "I was never one for religion."

"Well, I think you're about to be." I drew my knees to my chest, resting my chin between them. "Aeaea is said to have been created by Agni when he fell in love with one of Sedus's sirens. Sedus banished her here, to the Dark Sea, with the others who'd fallen out of his favor."

"Let me guess, Agni built the island to be with her?"

"Exactly."

"I'm taking it Sedus didn't appreciate that?"

I laughed quietly. "You could say that. They went to war—the same one Agni used the rock spears that surround the island."

"So, if the war is over, what could Xanu have meant by when Sedus conquers Agni's beasts?"

I looked at him again, blinking twice as I realized he was out of the bath, the towel wrapped around his waist. Hellfire, he was gorgeous. Every inch of him carved with muscle, water drops catching in his light smattering of chest hair, rolling down the planes of his abs into the towel.

"How'd you get that?" I stared at the raised white scar along his waist towards his navel, discussion of gods and wars forgotten.

Cazien looked down, his fingers going to the scar, covering it.

"A friend gave it to me," he said, his voice clogged. He cleared his throat, and moved to his pack at the end of the

bed. “Well, I guess she wasn’t much of a friend if she tried to kill me.”

I was too intrigued to look away as his towel dropped, though he was angled so I mostly saw his back, which was not bereft of scars either. My eyes followed his spine down to his lower back, where two dimples begged to be touched.

And then—my eyes shot back up to his shoulders—I’d not seen many naked men, but I knew without a doubt Cazien was the most beautiful man I’d ever seen.

All other thoughts fled from me as I found myself crawling towards him, rising up on my knees behind him. He stilled, a loose white shirt in his hands, as I brushed one of the scars on his shoulder. It was a thin slice of silver, barely three inches long and faded with time.

“And this one?”

He turned his head, not quite looking over his shoulder.  
“Skirmish on a border between lords.”

His low words stirred something inside of me, and I kept my touch light as I moved to another one. His skin, still warm and smooth from the water, captivated me. I wanted to touch, and touch, and touch. I would never get enough of touching this man, and the thought should have been terrifying, but instead it was electrifying.

“And this?”

“Dagger, bandit.”

Was his voice rough? Could he feel the same pull?

My fingers trailed lower, and my lips curled as goosebumps ran down his arms. “This one?” It was the thickest scar on his back, nearly half an inch wide and six inches long as it ran along his spine.

“Don’t know,” he answered and I stilled, looking up at him. All I could see was his damp hair, drying in waves, and the rough stubble across his jaw. “My brother—not Gavret, Brannen, said it was a fae most likely. Probably a half-breed. It attacked out of nowhere, and took me out before I could see it. Blade had some kind of tonic on it that knocked me out for days. They tracked it to its den, and it was clear it meant us as its next meal.”

I shuddered. Half fae were not always so... animalistic. Whether or not they were more human than beast was up to the whims of the gods. Some mothers knew during the pregnancy, the violence they felt inside themselves. Others wouldn’t know until the child was two or three, when the dark part of fae nature took over.

Humans simply couldn’t handle the light of the fae, and so halflings were left with the worst parts.

Cazien turned around to face me and I couldn’t lower my hand, not when I had this new skin to explore. But I couldn’t touch him either, not when I was so exposed. I tilted my head enough to look up through my eyelashes.

The hunger in his face was a blow to the chest. I couldn’t breathe, I couldn’t move. I was caught in his gaze, and all I wanted was for him to kiss me again.

His fingers were under my chin, pushing my head back a bit farther, so similar to how our last kiss had begun.

A fist pounded against the door and I jolted, but Cazien didn’t move, didn’t even look away, so I was still his captive.

“What?” he barked out, a threat in the single word.

“Runners are arriving.” Durnth. I pulled away from Cazien, my eyes on the floor as I scooted to the edge of the

bed and slipped my boots back on. “Same with the pack horses you wanted. You’ll want to inspect them, Talon.”

Cazien pulled on his shirt, and shoved his feet back into his own boots. “I’m coming.” He left, and if he looked at me before he did, I couldn’t see it. The door closed and I slumped, but then it opened again and my heart leapt into my throat.

But it was only a smug Durnth, who cast a satisfied grin between me and the bath.

“How is my little temptress doing?”

Any embers of arousal heating my core were doused by his question. Nausea replaced it instead.

“Don’t call me that,” I growled as I stood. I crossed my arms, glaring at him. “What do you want?”

He stepped into the room, closing the door behind him, and leaned his shoulder against it. “I want to make sure you’re doing what I told you to. And from the looks of it”—he nodded towards the bath—“you two are getting along just fine. What do you know about the treasure?”

Ignoring his statement about getting close to Cazien, I shuffled through his pack until I had the map in hand. Looking at the map couldn’t be seen as a betrayal, especially since we’d been talking about it. I spread it out on the table, ignoring the small clever pocket holding the clue.

“I’d have thought you’d be on the ship crew to handle Gavret,” I said as Durnth stood next to me.

“Vaddon can handle it, and if he can’t, then the rest of them can. I left something behind that’ll be sure to make

the other Talon and the captain sleep for a long time. Now, tell me about this.”

“Aeaea’s origins are from Agni, god of fire,” I began—but Durnth scoffed.

“Spare me the lecture, if I wanted religion I’d go find a temple.”

I clenched my teeth. Just because we were on a job didn’t mean Durnth would hold back if I lashed out.

“Talon”—I couldn’t think of him as Cazien as I talked about betraying him—“has a key, a message. Before you ask, no, I don’t know it.” Lying to Durnth was always easy.

“Xanu used the gods to hide his treasure. Before you interrupted, I’d been giving *him* a religious lecture.”

Durnth gave me a leer. “Sure, if that’s what they’re calling it these days. Because I ain’t asking you to sleep with him doesn’t mean I’d be mad if you did. It’s been some time since you last took a lover. Or if you’d feel bad sleeping with a mark, I know my way around—”

“No.” I interrupted. “I won’t sleep with Talon and I certainly don’t need any of the Hallows between my legs. You know my policy.”

“Smart one, not mixing business and pleasure.” Durnth squeezed my elbow patronizingly, as if he hadn’t offered to join me in bed. “But keep it in mind, once we’re outside the wall. Keep me updated. We’re out before dawn tomorrow, and we’ll all get a good night’s sleep seeing as Talon has forbidden us more than two tankards of ale.”

“Smart of him.”

Durnth grunted and left me alone in the room. I had everything I needed to go into the wilds of Aeaea, and I’d

made sure there was no reason for me to leave the inn. I moved to the window, and with one last look at the Dark Sea, I closed the blue shutters and crawled into the bed.

## CHAPTER NINE



**W**hen I woke again, it was to Cazien kicking the door open. I sat up, shoving the hair that'd escaped from my braid out of my face. “Oh, good, you’re up,” he drawled sarcastically. He had a wooden tray in his hands and a bottle of what I assumed was wine.

“Did you need me for anything?” I grouched back. “I’m supposed to be a guide, and I’m pretty sure you don’t need me to hold your hand around the city. Might stop women from flirting with you.”

“Just come eat before it gets cold or I’ll throw it out the window.”

Glaring at the sour man, I moved to join him at the table, realizing the tub had been removed. When Cazien saw where I was looking, he spoke as he pulled the cork from the wine.

“I told them if they woke you, you’d likely murder them before you realized who they were.”

I choked on the piece of focaccia I’d bitten off. I enjoyed the cuisine of Scrya, but Aeanean food tasted like home.

“Excuse me?”

My scandalized tone got the barest hint of a smile, but it was better than the scowl he'd been sporting since he opened the door.

"There are perks to sharing a room with someone like me. They all think you're as deadly as I am, since you're clearly not a court noble."

I gaped at him and he gestured to my outfit with his now full wine glass. "With the lack of gowns and jewels, obviously."

I rolled my eyes and snagged the wine glass out of his hand. He grumbled but poured a second one for himself.

I dipped the focaccia into the rich broth of the paella, salty and bold from the seafood and roasted tomatoes. I moaned as the flavors burst on my tongue.

"So your preferred lover is food?"

I looked at him, embarrassed to have made such an obscene sound. But it was really, really good.

"Food can disappoint, but never as much as men."

"Ouch." He clasped his hand to his chest as if I'd struck him. He said nothing else, and we continued eating with a comfortable silence between us. The only sounds were the distant waves of the sea and Aeanean musicians beginning their nightly performances. It was more peaceful than I expected.

"So, to use your words, who pissed in your wine?" I watched him as I took a large gulp of my own.

He speared a small octopus with his fork with evident frustration. "Your fellow men are assholes."

I snorted. "I could have told you that."

He glared at his dish with fury close to Agni's. I sat upright, reaching out to him.

"What happened?" Had Durnth already messed up? Had one of the Hallows thought to try to kill Cazien already and start the treasure hunt? I looked him over, but he seemed fine, physically at least.

He grumbled something into his wine.

"Excuse me?" I raised an eyebrow.

He sighed and set the glass down before meeting my eyes. It was stunning, to have so much force turned on me.

"I overheard a comment, no, a whole conversation, about you."

I shrugged. "There's no secret a lot of them believe I think myself above them. I refuse to sleep with any of them. They take exception to any woman who refuses them."

Cazien's hand tightened on the stem of the glass. "So what was it this time?" I tried to sound amused. "They pissed I'm not in the stables with them?"

Cazien didn't look away like so many others might have. He held my eyes as he spoke. "They've decided you're only here as my whore. That I keep you chained to my bed so I can fuck you when I want."

Fire rushed to my face, in fact, my whole body burned at his words. I hoped he thought it was anger. Because there was no way in hell I'd admit the idea of being chained to his bed, at his mercy, made heat pool at the tops of my thighs. He was still waiting for my response, and I let out a large sigh.

"To be fair, you did say you'd pay me to sleep with you if I needed the coin," I teased. His eyes narrowed at me, and I

waved away his annoyance. “Yes, I know you were just being an asshole. But I don’t give a damn about their opinions so long as they do their job. When this is all over, I won’t have to see any of their ugly faces again.”

He paused, his fork half raised in the air. “What do you mean?”

I shrugged, turning my attention to what was left of my dinner. I pushed around the soaked rice as I answered. “I agreed to do this job because when it’s over, I’m leaving Constinbul. I’m going across the Great Sea.”

“To one of the new kingdoms?”

“To where I don’t know anyone, and no one knows me.”

He was silent, and I looked up at him, curious to what I’d see on his expression.

“What happened here?” The question was so gentle, I blinked—swearing I’d imagined it. “What happened to you so long ago it’d drive you to the unknown?”

“Does it matter?”

A swarm of bats had taken residence in my stomach. I was foolish to suddenly want it to matter to him what happened to me. Not even Durnth knew the truth. He knew what I’d told him, that my parents had been killed and I’d escaped being sold as a child bride.

Looking at Cazien, I wanted to tell him. The past strained against the box I’d shoved it into. I wanted someone to see, to know me. And if he said it didn’t matter, I didn’t know if I could shove the pain back into the dark of my mind.

He set his fork down, food forgotten, and leaned back in his chair. “Tell me, Minerva.”

I swallowed, reaching for my wine, fortifying myself with the rest of it. When I set the empty glass down, he filled it again along with his own.

"My father's official business was mapmaking. The current map of Aeaea you have is one of his," I began. Cazien's face was still, his eyes focused on me, taking in every movement as I tried not to distract myself. "He traveled all over the island. To the different villages surviving beyond the wall. The volcano hasn't spewed fire in generations, so there are more villages than you'd guess. He had another trade, though, one not even my mother knew about. He was a smuggler."

I couldn't stay seated anymore. Not as memories of my father's and my travels came back. I moved to the window, pushing open the blue shutters and letting in the evening breeze and the sound of the sea crashing on the shore. I braced myself against the sill, gripping it until my knuckles turned white.

"He loved me, I never doubted that. And he really was training me in cartography. But I was also a useful cover." I laughed, a sound full of bitterness. "Who would think the doting father and his little girl were smuggling alcohol and magical contraband in and out of Aeaea and the wall?"

"The smuggling is what got them killed?"

I looked over my shoulder at Cazien, who leaned forward on his elbows, his wine glass cradled between his hands but forgotten.

I stared at him, ready for panic to clamp the words in my throat, to cut myself off from this bleeding vulnerability. It never came.

"My father got greedy." My voice was even, my throat didn't burn with tears. "He wanted to cut out his partners in Grotto and sell the products from beyond the wall to the buyers himself. He did it for a while. But I think he only got away with it for so long because they wanted to take him by surprise."

My father had been so happy, so proud of himself. My mother and I had thought it was because he'd secured a new map client across the Dark Sea.

"I still remember what my father was wearing, the night they barged into our home." My eyes burned, but I didn't waver. "We were eating dinner, the three of us. There were so many of them. They held my mother and I, and we had to watch as they beat him. And then, before he was dead, they made him watch as they slit her throat. They killed him next, and dragged me away."

I brushed away a tear with the back of my hand. I'd cried enough over their loss, of the loss of my future. There never seemed to be an end to the tears though.

I drew in a haggard breath and returned to the table, desperately drinking the wine. I could feel it beginning to affect me, soothing the jagged edges of my pain.

"They intended to sell me to a wealthy noble who desired a child bride. When I escaped after we deboarded from the ship in Constinbul, they tried to hunt me. I was on the streets by myself for a week before Durnth caught me picking his pocket and took me in rather than killing me."

Cazien rose, and I watched him, trepidation stilling my heart. There was a ferocity in his eyes, and steel in his voice.

"Do you know their names?"

I snorted. "Two of them, at least."

"Tell me."

I stared at him. "No. You don't get to suddenly be a hero when I have no need of one. It was a decade ago. If the gods are kind, they're already rotting at the bottom of the sea."

He brushed his knuckles across my cheek, the fire in his eyes softening, though never extinguishing. "The gods are rarely kind, darling."

The air escaped the room and we stepped closer to each other, our gazes never breaking. Something pulled me to him, a chain bound around my ribs leading to his own, tightening with every passing day.

"I don't need you to be my hero, Cazien." I leaned into his touch.

His lip curled into a smirk, twisting the embers of arousal inside of me until they burned towards my heart. "I doubt you'll ever need a hero, Min." Oh, I liked it when he called me that. "Perhaps someone to watch your back. But you're not a damsel in need of rescuing."

His voice had dropped, a rumble of thunder washing over my skin like waves breaking on the shore. If someone knocked, I might kill them rather than break this moment and drag one of us away.

I looked at his lips, slightly parted as if he struggled to breathe. He was stealing my breath for his own, or maybe I was stealing his. Whatever happened tomorrow no longer mattered.

Torun and Soal didn't matter. Durnth didn't matter. King Xanu and his treasure didn't matter. Sailing across the

Great Sea didn't matter.

All that mattered was if he'd kiss me before I perished of want.

His knuckles continued to brush gentle circles on my cheek and when I met his eyes again, his pupils had nearly devoured the blue until it was nothing more than a narrow ring. His own skin was flushed, yet he held himself perfectly still other than the excruciating touch on my face.

"I won't make the choice for you," he whispered, never breaking my gaze. God, my heart ruptured at his words, shattering the walls I'd kept around me for the last ten years.

Gripping his shirt in both fists, I yanked him down, rising on my bare toes to meet him. I wasn't experienced, my only other kiss with him the evening before. But my eagerness spurred him on. His arms came around me, one like a band of steel at my waist binding me to him, the other gripping my messy braid, cradling my head as his lips met mine.

Last night's kiss had sent my heart racing.

This kiss stopped my heart entirely.

There was no teasing. I let him in. He kissed me as if he were already bedding me, demanding I surrender everything to him and I did. My own hands moved upwards, burying my fingers in his hair, pulling it in desperation.

He growled into my mouth and I pulled back, panting heavily. "Sorry, I didn't mean to," I said between breaths.

"Do it again," he growled before crushing me to him once more.

Cazien reached down, his arm moving from my waist to under my ass, lifting me up with hardly a grunt of effort.

Instinctively, I wrapped my legs around his waist and it was my time to growl as he pressed against my core.

When I arched, pressing myself against him, he moved and I was trapped between the wall and his solid chest. He held me there with the strength of his hips against mine, ripping his mouth from my lips to burn kisses into my jaw.

It was all I could do to keep breathing, to grip his thick hair and hold him to me as he kissed my neck. I turned my head, a silent plea as I exposed my neck to this predator. I was his prey, there was no doubt in my mind.

But I craved it, I craved this violent feeling he stoked in my core. I wanted to feel the strength and power crawling under his skin released against me. I needed it more than I needed anything else.

I pulled his head away from my neck, his lips leaving with an obscene sound that made me gasp. "I need—" Hell, I didn't know what I needed. Only needed more of this, of him.

He seemed to know what I struggled with and he turned us, pulling me away from the wall. I cried out. I didn't want there to be space between us. Cazien silenced that sound with another kiss and, more gracefully than I'd have expected, got to his knees on the bed, laying me down, a strong arm between my shoulder blades not letting me fall.

A spike of fear cut through the desire and I held his shoulders, gripping them for a lifeline.

He leaned down, his body braced high above me so we didn't touch, my legs sprawled open. His kiss was gentle, a chaste press of his swollen lips to mine. He rubbed his nose against mine, our gazes locked.

"Trust me, darling." He sounded broken. "I'm not going to fuck you tonight. But I'll give you what you need."

I gaped at him, too bewildered by desire and hesitation to really understand. "Why not?" I would have let him, I think he knew it too. It terrified me, to have only experienced my first kiss yesterday and then be standing at the edge of giving him everything.

He pressed a kiss against my forehead, then my eyes, my cheeks, and then my lips, before answering.

"Because I might be an asshole, but even I know you deserve more than a quick tumble, Minerva. And when it happens, there is no part of you that I will not know, will not touch, will not taste."

"Oh," was all I could manage, breathless.

He kissed me again and I didn't know where to put my hands. When one of his slipped under my tunic, the rough skin from years of using a blade sent waves of lightning across my core, I did what I'd secretly wanted to since that first night.

I tugged at his shirt until he moved enough to let me pull it off of him. I dragged my fingers down his back, and he pressed his hips against me as he groaned. I arched against him in response, the need turning brutal and demanding inside me again.

When he pushed up my tunic, I sat up, struggling to get enough room between us to let him pull it up and over my head. My arms got caught, tangled above my head, and I laughed as he cursed. When I was free, he was smiling too, a matching humor in his eyes.

He pressed a hand against my bare shoulder, pushing me back down to the bed and took me in.

There was no room for insecurity or doubt, not with the desire and almost awe in his gaze. His eyes traveled up my bare torso until he looked at me.

“Fuck, you’re gorgeous.”

“You, too,” I replied, a smile still on my face.

We surged together, and I touched every bare inch of his skin that I could. I writhed against him, unable to hold still as he dropped his mouth to my breasts. And when he wrapped his lips around the pert peak, a moan pulled its way from deep inside.

He thrust against my core, my leggings and his pants separating us, but there was no mistaking his own arousal. I gripped him with my thighs, my hips undulating as he lavished my breasts with the same devouring kisses he’d given me earlier.

“Cazien—” I gasped out his name, feeling something inside of me twisting tight. I was chasing something I’d never experienced, but I knew he could catch it for me. I needed him to catch it for me.

I’ve never seen anyone look so beautiful, so absolutely full of arousal, as he did when he looked up at me, my breast inches from his mouth. He rose up above me again, and I tilted my hips, not wanting to stop chasing that desire.

“Shhh,” he whispered against my lips, his hand pressing my hips back down into the mattress and away from him. I whimpered, and he nipped at my lower lip. “I’ve got you.”

He slid his flat palm across my stomach, his fingertips tracing the waist of my leggings, and he met my eyes in

silent question.

I gripped his shoulders again, this time certain that if I didn't hold on to him, I'd fly from the bed. I nodded, straining up to kiss him again. He kissed me, slowly, and opened his mouth as his hand slipped under my leggings and cupped my burning core. He rested his forehead against mine, his chest heaving above me. "Fuck, you're wet."

The way he said it made me know that was a really, really good thing. I couldn't speak, not with his hand so close to giving me what my body demanded. He'd reduced me so easily to nothing but sounds and movements. I bucked against his hand and our eyes met.

He stroked a finger through me, and my mouth fell open.

"If you don't like something, you have to tell me," he said and I had no idea how he was able to be so composed. I nodded shakily, and then I knew what real torment was.

His kisses, hungry and devouring, had been a prelude to this. I held on to him, focusing on his eyes as an anchor as his fingers twisted me tighter and tighter. I wanted to close my eyes against the onslaught, but I couldn't—I needed to see him as he drove my pleasure higher.

I squeezed him with my thighs, pressing down against his hand, and when he slipped a finger finally inside me, I cried out. He stroked the inside of me, showing me an impossibly higher level of pleasure.

"That's it, let yourself feel it," he spoke against my lips, as if feeding me his words. "You're close now. I can feel it." He slipped a second finger in me and I let out a quiet sob. It

was impossible to feel embarrassed at riding his hand, trying to find that elusive stroke that my body demanded.

My fingers dug into his skin, gasping, my awareness narrowing to Cazien around me, his fingers stroking relentlessly. Sage, spice, and our lust flooded my senses, and with every breath, I took Cazien into every part of me. I tightened, every muscle tense as if I fought with Cazien instead.

Then he curled the two fingers inside of me, pressing down with the heel of his palm against the sensitive bundle at the top of my sex.

Every breath escaped me as my body stuttered, every nerve poised like a match dragged before lighting. The treasure he'd been hunting down within me was now his captive, waves of it washing over me, my body undulating against his.

My eyes closed, lights bursting in the dark, and everything shot back in a rush. Cazien licked me, lapping my moans from my lips, his fingers still stroking deep within me, drawing out the pleasure.

All I could do was cling to him, and my body threatened to send me over that edge once more as his own growls of pleasure broke through my senses to bury deep within my gut.

His hand was trapped as he rocked in the grip of my thighs, as if he needed to follow me into the maelstrom he'd created. He eased me down, my body shaking as he slipped his fingers from me. I twitched, my breath hitching as he stroked my sensitive folds.

His eyes were squeezed tight, and I feared he was in pain. I didn't let myself think, only move. I snaked my hands down between us, going to the laces at his pants. His eyes flared open, his hand locking like manacles around my wrist.

"This was supposed to be about you," he said. I knew that if I pulled away, he would go no further. But I could hear the same need in his voice that he'd satisfied in me.

"So let it be about me," I challenged him, moving against his hold. He released me with a muttered curse, but he helped me unlace his pants. He released himself from the confines, his hand slick with my own pleasure stroking himself once, twice.

"Show me," I demanded, grasping him.

"Fucking hell," he staggered out, satisfaction pounding in my chest. I had made him, Cazien Demonbane Talon, curse breathlessly.

He wrapped his hand around mine, his shaft hard and slick from me. He guided my hand, stroking him firmly. His eyes opened as he barked out a hoarse laugh.

"It's not going to take much," he said, releasing my hand and bracing himself on his forearms on either side of my shoulders. I kept up the rhythm he'd shown me, marveling at his slack mouth, his eyes closed with pleasure, his stomach jumping each time my hand grazed his sensitive skin.

His hips stuttered into my hand, and I felt powerful. I wanted to laugh with it as I made the man above me begin to unravel until he was nothing but his baser instincts.

I lunged upwards, my lips going to the pulse point in his throat even as I buried my other hand in his hair, pulling harshly.

He jerked, his hips thrusting hard into my fist as a sound caught between a growl and a moan tore from his lips. Warmth coated my stomach and my hand as I stroked him, urging every last moment of pleasure from him as he'd done for me.

Cazien grabbed my hand, gentle—reverent, pulling me away from him. He forced open his eyes, his body straining to stay above me, his face lax with satiation. I needed him close again, uncaring of the mess he'd made of my stomach.

I tugged him down against me and he went willingly, a comforting weight grounding me to this realm. Our mouths found each other; the kisses slower, softer.

My hands stroked over his back, and he rolled to the side, bringing me with him. We'd need to clean up eventually, but neither of us moved away from the other. Our breathing calmed, our hearts settled, and still I couldn't get enough of Cazien.

He met me caress for caress, sigh for sigh, gentle kiss for gentle kiss, until sleep took us both.

## CHAPTER TEN



**W**hen I woke, I curled tighter under the warm blanket, refusing to wake quite yet. Every part of me was relaxed, and all I wanted to do was sleep in. And maybe repeat the experience with Cazien.

“Remember to keep your head straight,” a familiar voice spoke quietly.

“It is,” Cazien replied, as quiet. I opened my eyes, enough to see the two men as blurry figures and not enough to let them know I was awake.

Gavret stood in front of Cazien, his arms crossed and an angry look on his face. Cazien hadn’t bothered putting a shirt on, his sculpted back to me. I flushed at the red scratch marks I must have put there last night.

“Let me come with you.” Gavret’s ire was showing. What was he so mad about? The warmth of the blanket tucked around me did nothing to stop the ice crawling through me. “You need someone to watch your back. Don’t forget what happened last time.”

Cazien snorted and glanced towards me before replying to his brother. He jabbed his finger against the rough scar

along his hip. “Trust me, brother, I remember every day what happened last time. I don’t need you to watch my back, I need you to watch the ship. Keep the Hallows in line. I don’t trust them.”

Gavret stared hard at Cazien before he held out his hand. They clasped forearms and the older brother shook his head. “Look for Zypher in three days.”

“Go,” Cazien said, clapping his brother on the shoulder. “Before the port master charges me for holding up a spot on the dock.”

When Cazien closed the door, I stretched as if I was waking up and had heard nothing of the conversation.

“Good morning,” he said, his tone softer than before. He held out a cup that steamed. “Ready for adventure?”

I snorted but sat up—keeping the blanket tucked up to my shoulders and accepted the tea gratefully. “Always,” I muttered before taking a sip of the mint tea Aeaeans preferred.

“We never finished our discussion,” I said after a few minutes. I’d been content to watch him get ready, crouching next to his packs as he checked over his gear.

“Which one?”

“About the gods,” I clarified. Then I frowned and pulled the blanket away to look down at my stomach. “Did you clean me up?” My face rivaled a lit torch. He didn’t even bother turning back to look at me.

“Of course,” he said, finally dragging a shirt on. “You were out and I hate spending the whole night a mess, so when I woke up, I took care of it.”

“Thanks.”

"You were saying?"

"Oh. Right. Well, you mentioned the war between Agni and Sedus was over, but it's not."

I finished the rest of the tea, and slipped from the bed, rushing over to my own pack to dig out a breast band and shirt. The day would warm eventually, but the room was too chilly to go unclothed. "The lore says their war ended in a stalemate. So they still battle at times. The larger battles cause the volcano to erupt as Agni uses it to throw fire into the sea."

"So..." Cazien trailed off, going back to the map still spread out. "We're looking for a place where the gods continue to fight?"

I pulled my sleeves down over my hands even as I undid my braid. "That's my guess. It's the only thing that makes sense, from what I know of the island. Wherever it is, it's below desolation."

Cazien looked at me with a grin and I paused as I rebraided my hair. "You've been thinking about this."

I arched an eyebrow. "You promised that if we found it, I'd get as much treasure as I could carry. Yes, I've been thinking about it."

"So, where is this desolation then, darling?"

I scrunched my face and tied off the braid. "That's the issue."

I rose and stood next to him. The heat from him pressing against me, tempting me to climb into his lap and make him kiss me again. But he gave no indication of being interested in anything other than our conversation so I forced myself to focus.

I pointed to the limestone hills. “This is where my gut tells me, especially since you’d marked the area already. But throughout the island’s history, there’ve been multiple places razed to bedrock from their battles. When Xanu was alive, this area could have been flourishing and it was somewhere else that was desolated.”

“Xanu would have avoided Grotto, and these are the places most likely to have some access to the shore.” Cazien pointed out three different places along the coast. “That’s what Gavret and Resuld are looking for. Anywhere a brave enough crew would venture to store a dragon’s hoard of treasure.”

“Which way are they going?” I scanned the map.

“To the west first.” He pointed towards a highly jungled area. It was near another circle he’d marked on the map. “I marked this area because, from what I gathered, it’s been empty for years.”

I shook my head. “Not empty,” I said, pointing to three different locations. “Unless they’ve moved, there are small villages here, here and here. When I visited, they were no larger than a few families each. Survival outside the wall is difficult but not impossible.”

He looked at me, and I met his gaze. “Do you think they might know anything?”

I shrugged. “There’s a good chance they’ll know of any caves that can be descended into. The natives know the land extremely well. They’d be a better guide than me.”

“Yes, but could I get them to talk to me or even find them without you?”

I smiled. “Probably not.”

"My point exactly, darling." He purred the endearment and the heat he'd satisfied the previous night threatened to consume me once more.

Shouts of men and the whinnies of ponies came up through the opened window and Cazien folded up the map. I hauled on my pack, and ran my hands over my bandolier, checking each blade stored there. I looked up to see Cazien watching me with a peculiar expression.

"What?"

"I'm imagining you wearing nothing but that bandolier while I bury my face between your legs."

Like that, my breath was gone. He winked, opening the door and jerking his head towards the hallway. "Let's go."

I stormed past him, refusing to let him know how much he'd affected me. From his knowing smirk though, he probably knew exactly what his words did. The bottom floor of the inn was empty save for us and, being bold, I stopped as I grabbed the door handle. I looked over my shoulder at him and smiled.

"If you're lucky, I'll hold a blade to your throat while you're down there."

I opened the door and marched into the square, now filled with a team of pack ponies, letting a mask of indifference fall into place.

The ponies the stable hands had acquired for Cazien were solid beasts. I inspected them carefully, running my hand down one of their legs, coaxing it to raise its hoof for me. They were strong, sturdy, and nothing to look at. The beasts looked minuscule compared to Nixus and the roan.

"Will they do?" Cazien watched me look them over. I nodded, approving of the choices.

"As beautiful as your mounts are, these beasts are made for the land beyond the wall. We may find ourselves walking more than riding the tall horses. And they'll be able to carry men if we need them too."

I could feel the Hallows' eyes on us, and one of them grumbled about not having expected to be walking the entire time. I shot him a glare.

"Beyond the wall isn't a stroll in the Scrya foothills, Juns," I snapped. "We'll be going slow enough that there's no reason not to walk."

"Which is why you're riding that one, eh?" Juns snapped back, the insinuation clear as the morning sun rising over the horizon. Cazien shifted beside me, but I sneered at Juns, batting my eyelashes.

"At least his steed is worth riding." Juns's eyes went wide and I continued on, my voice dripping poisoned honey. "It wasn't long ago I'd heard Lara complaining about your own mount going lame."

The man snarled and whirled around, and Durnth shot me a glare.

"Play nice," he ordered and I raised an eyebrow.

"I'll play however I damn well please and you know it."

Durnth shook his head. "We aren't in Constinbul, woman. Your tent will be close to his and you know Juns has a temper with a knife to back it up."

Cazien stepped forward, his head cocked. "Is that a threat?"

"A factual reminder," Durnth countered. "We'll be ready to go soon. I'll meet you at the gates."

I stepped back as the roan was led to me. The mare's head towered over mine, but she was a beauty. I looked at him over her back. "Where are you going?"

"I wasn't lying when I said I'm looking to expand, girl," he said, a wily grin on his face. "Got a potential partner to touch base with. Had a nice conversation with them yesterday. Never leave a city without one last contact."

Durnth saluted Cazien, who was inspecting Nixus's hooves and then Cian's, the roan.

"I won't wait for you," he called to Durnth.

"Wouldn't expect you to," Durnth called back before waltzing down the street.

I stared after him for another moment before strapping my packs to Cian's saddle. It would have been too easy to ask for Cazien's assistance, since the mare's back was level with my shoulders. But I managed well enough, and before the sun was completely above the horizon, I was swinging my leg over her back and settling in.

Cazien was already in his saddle, Nixus eager to get going, whereas Cian was content to stay put until I signaled otherwise. I wondered if their mounts reflected their owner's personalities. Nixus certainly seemed to be Cazien in horse form, all strength and energy straining to be released. And Gavret was known as the Hunter, a man with iron determination and indomitable patience.

I patted Cian's neck and murmured, "I think we're going to get along just fine, girl." She let out a breath, shaking her head as if in agreement.

Cazien moved to the front of the square, the men he'd hired lined up next to the pack ponies, watching him expectantly. At least none of the men had to carry more than their preferred weapons and canteens. Juns had nothing to complain about, the man was going soft in his age. In more things than one, it seemed.

"I hired you because you've all faced danger and death in your life," Cazien began. "We go beyond the wall, where death could be waiting for all of us. But if we conquer this island, I'll be sure that you walk away rich men with a tale to woo pretty women with."

A laugh and half cheer went up at his words. "Let's go get rich, boys," Cazien said, and wheeled Nixus around. She rose up on her hind legs, turning gracefully as her front legs kicked the open air. She landed, Cazien never once losing his balance on her back, and strode down the road. I rocked forward, lifting Cian's reins, and the rest of us followed behind him.

Cazien slowed enough for Cian to match pace with Nixus, letting us ride side by side. There was nothing of the fiery Cazien in him now. This was the man I'd first met, the lord of war and death, riding into danger with a fierce grin on his face.

"You want a fight, don't you?" It wasn't really a question. I knew his answer.

"Is it an adventure without bloodshed?"

I snorted. "So long as I get paid, one way or another. I'm not here for the thrill of it."

He hummed. "I could have sworn otherwise last night, darling."

I rolled my eyes. “It was”—I tilted my head back and forth, as if weighing my experience—“not a terrible way to pass an evening.”

His laugh was dark, and it churned deep inside me.

“Be sure to let me know if you need to be bored to sleep again.”

It was my turn to hum in response. The sounds of hooves echoed off of the stone buildings around us, filling the quiet morning as Grotto slowly began to come to life. Gulls called above, flying towards the coast where the fishermen would be preparing for the day’s work. The blue shutters were open along the houses, letting the cool morning air fill the rooms to combat the heat Aeaea was known for.

Beyond the wall, we’d be under the thick canopies of the tropical forest, but the humidity would be worse than the heat. At least the villages should offer a place to bathe and wash the damp from our clothing.

I turned to look at the pack line behind us, counting two horses with water barrels. “We’ll need to refill the water as much as possible.” It wasn’t pleasant, dying of thirst in an environment where the air itself was thick with water. “The Hallows aren’t used to this type of heat, and I wouldn’t claim to be anymore. I can’t speak to the captain’s men, but we should expect those four barrels to not last long.”

“There are rivers and creeks beyond the wall?”

I nodded. “Not large ones, and there are markers I should be able to recognize. Do you still have a talisman to purify any water we collect?”

He reached into a pouch on his bandolier and pulled out a dark sapphire the size of a robin’s egg, runes etched on

its surface and a cord threaded through a small hole at the center. "Cost me more than your services, but it should have enough magic to last three months."

"If we're beyond the wall for that long, it'll be because we're dead."

His still face twitched, and I was hard-pressed to decide if he found my comment amusing or worrying.

"I have no plans on staying out that long, nor dying."

We turned away from the coast when we reached the main road. Other carts and hacksaws were already making their way down to port, the merchants nodding or raising their hands in greeting.

The gate in the wall rose above us, the road climbing steadily up one of the ridges Grotto was situated between. More people were on the street by then, the city fully awake and making the most of the morning before the temperature rose too high.

There was a line to go beyond the wall, a few trappers and hunters willing to risk their lives for the rare furs found within the Aeaean jungle. They were rugged-looking people, their bodies hard and lined with years of experience beyond the wall. Each one of them, no matter the gender, had a hard look to their eyes, their jaw set. Going beyond the wall meant tempting death, but the reward could feed their family for months.

"There's Durnth."

I followed Cazien's look and saw the man striding easily towards us from a narrow alley, his thumb hooked casually in his sword belt.

"Told you I'd make it."

"Your business settled?" Cazien sounded bored.

"It's between stages for now," he answered, looking over the men behind us. "When I get back, I'll know if it's worked out."

Durnth waited as the line moved forward and fell in step with two of the Hallows. They shared words, the three of them smiling. Durnth met my eyes, grinning, and I turned away from him. Unease made my neck crawl.

This close to the wall, it towered over the buildings and we were trapped in its shadow. One look showed it wasn't a wall created by men. It was all one large piece of black volcanic stone, threads of obsidian glinting through it. The base was thicker than the top, and if the priests were to be believed, it was because every time Agni blew fire from the volcano, he added to the wall.

The result was a massive black wave of stone, the top curling towards Grotto as if ready to crash down against the white buildings.

"Party number, destination, and expected return date?"

I froze in my inspection of the wall. That voice. The tea threatened to return, nausea knotting my stomach, and sweat breaking out along my forehead despite the still cool temperature of the morning.

"Total of twenty-one men. I'm the party leader, Cazien Talon," he reported blandly to the man who'd haunted my nightmares for the last ten years. "I wasn't aware that we were required to submit a report for access beyond the wall."

Torun held a clipboard and an ink pen as he stared at Cazien. If he was intimidated by him, Torun didn't show it.

His eyes jumped to me and back, my breath caught in my throat. Did he recognize me?

"You must not have recent information," he drawled, as if bored. "Grotto has lost too much gold in taxes by prime commodities being lost in transport or unrecorded."

I was going to vomit. He had to recognize me. He was dressed in fine white linen, a wide blue sash wrapped around his middle, and rings of gold and precious jewels covered his fingers.

How many of the prime commodities he spoke of were children? My fingers itched, I gripped the reins tighter to hold back from burying one of my blades in the swine's eye. My grip made Cian dance in place, throwing her head back as she tried to understand my signal.

It made both Cazien and Torun look at me, Torun's face curious and Cazien's still save a minor raise of his brow.

I relaxed, focusing on settling Cian and myself, and tried to ignore the weight of Torun's inspection.

Cazien let out a sigh, as if affronted that one of his standing was expected to report his every movement to a gatekeeper. "We are on an exploratory expedition. I hope to return within four weeks but have supplies to last eight weeks."

Torun's gaze slid from me to Cazien between us. "And what do you expect to find?"

Cazien shrugged his shoulder. "I consider this a vacation. I'm wealthy and bored. My brother, the Duke of Ontalya, told me to go spend time in the wild. I've chosen Aeaea. I was told beyond the wall would be suited to me."

Torun snorted, but noted something on the parchment. "If you or your party do not return in eight weeks, we will send word to the duke of your presumed demise."

"Do we have permission to proceed?"

Torun looked to the two guards holding the gate closed and nodded. They swung it open, the road turning from cobblestone to dirt past the arc of the metal. Less than ten yards beyond the gate, the path disappeared in the tree line.

"I look forward to your return," Torun called to Cazien as we walked through the gate. I stared ahead at the vine-covered trees and told myself I didn't feel Torun's eyes on me.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



**B**y midday, my thin shirt clung to my sweat dampened skin, and I'd had to redo my hair, knotting the braid high on my head in a desperate attempt to get it off of my neck. Even Cazien had tied his hair back in a haphazard bun, though dark strands escaped, trapped against his skin by sweat. It should've been gross, and no doubt the rest of the men made my nose scrunch in distaste.

But a sweaty Cazien, strands of black hair covering his freshly shaven face?

I found myself wanting to capture the drop of moisture rolling down his neck with my tongue.

Is this what shared pleasure did to people—made everything sensual and arousing?

It was a good thing the path through the jungle was difficult. It at least kept me focused.

Twice I'd been proven right, the terrain forcing Cazien and me to walk beside the warhorses for short distances. The ponies behind us had little issue with the sudden inclines or declines.

The heat and the hike I could handle, but what I loathed was the bugs. I slapped another flying thing that'd made the mistake of landing on my arm, my mood deteriorating quickly.

"I doubt I need to tell you they're only going to get worse," Cazien said most unhelpfully.

"I never missed this part. Ever." I slapped another one. Why did I forget about the bugs? How could I have forgotten about this hell? I could have packed lemongrass balm, an entire saddlebag's worth. It would have kept all but the most determined insects away.

I wasn't the only one loathing the bugs. Grunts and curses followed by dull thumps came from behind us, as the men fought off their own tormenters. I glared at Cazien, who rode Nixus with ease, utterly ignoring the bugs around him.

"How?"

He didn't bother asking what I meant. "You get used to ignoring the flies when you've had to deal with bloody battlefields. Eventually they become a part of life."

I shuddered. In Constinbul, the street patrols didn't let bodies sit for too long. Death spread disease too quickly in cities as cramped as Constinbul. I knew flies would zero in on a corpse within minutes of death, and it was gag-inducing to consider a battlefield with days-old corpses and the amount of flies that would mean.

I needed to think about something else. Anything else.

"Where'd you find the map?"

He checked behind us, making sure the closest man was far enough away for some privacy. Long treks like these

ended up spreading out parties as large as ours. It was a security risk, but this close to the wall, Cazien allowed it. The deeper into the island, though, the closer we'd be.

"I found it tucked away in a drawer full of other maps in a keep we'd secured."

"By secured you mean...?"

"Attacked and taken over? Yes," he said. "But we were on the right side of the battle. I try to avoid being on the oppressive side, when I can."

A lord of war with a moral code. I tried to put the walls around my heart back in place, but every new thing I learned about him put another dent in the foundation. Before yesterday, I'd been protected, and now the wall was in tatters.

"I always make a point to inspect any studies or libraries," he continued, guiding Nixus around a buttressed root.

The trees on Aeaea had roots that rose out of the ground, shaped like sails on a ship. When I first saw the trees in Scrya, I'd asked where their roots were and a man had laughed and said under the dirt as if there was no other place they'd be. These trees had always inspired adventure and excitement when I'd traveled through them.

"I like adventure. I spend half of the year away from Scrya, exploring different cultures or lands. Sometimes that includes taking up arms in the name of a cause I believe in. Sometimes it means drinking my way through a city known for its ale. But, no matter why I'm somewhere, I always look for my next adventure."

I stared at his back, the path still too narrow for us to ride side by side again.

"You're a damned spoiled noble," I said, shocked at my own realization. Cazien looked over his shoulder with a frown. "You just... travel wherever you want, spending your family's money, and what? What purpose do you have?"

"I'll have you know it only took a year for me to build up my own personal fortune." I think I offended him. "I'm third in line to inherit the family title, so I have the freedom to live how I please. Gods willing, Brannen will stop being a jackass and finally pick out a wife, and she'll have enough children that I'll never have to worry about taking up the title."

I rolled my eyes. "Oh, I feel so sorry for you. Your life must be full of struggle."

He turned in his saddle, resting his arm on the pommel. "What's your problem today?"

I waved in front of my face, shooing the irritating fly away from me for a few more minutes.

"I can't believe you." I stared right back at him. "This trip *is* another adventure to you. Another chance to get a scar to tell women you bed. Have you ever considered, I don't know, settling down and doing something more productive with your life than fucking and fighting?"

His eyebrows shot up at that and irritation set his shoulders. I remembered he wasn't some low-level Hallows, that Cazien had earned his violent reputation.

"Not that you have any right to know," he spat, "but yes, I did plan on settling down. Even found a pretty woman I considered myself in love with. Then, two days before the

wedding, she gave me this.” He yanked up his shirt, revealing the gnarled scar at his hip. “So, yeah, I decided I’d rather fight and fuck my way across the world than try to find another woman to let crush me under her heel.”

My stomach dropped, and sympathy and horror at what I’d said to him doused my irritation. He shoved his shirt back down, his glare fierce enough to rival the fires of Agni, and turned towards the path in front of us.

“What happened?” My voice held none of the fire it had before.

He was quiet for so long I didn’t think he’d answer. But then he spoke.

“You’re right. My family is old and wealthy. I’m a third son, so not as grand of a match as Brannen or even Gavret. She didn’t seem to care, though. But then I caught her giving Brannen an ultimatum. Take her as his mistress, with everything that entails, or she’d make my life a living hell. He said no and left. I waited in her room for her return.

“After she stopped trying to deny her betrayal, she admitted it was her father’s idea and that she’d never have gone for me if Brannen hadn’t avoided court. Then, when she tried to make it up to me”—he scowled—“she pulled a knife.”

A woman who’d claimed to love him and betrayed him in such a brutal, horrific way. “What’d you do?” I wasn’t sure if I wanted to know, but I’d asked anyways.

He shrugged, still looking ahead. “I killed her. Then I killed her father.”

If I hadn’t been riding Cian, I’d have stopped in place.

“You—you killed the woman you loved?”

"Yes. And I don't regret it, since she'd have killed me otherwise. She made that clear enough."

I didn't—couldn't say anything to that and our conversation dropped completely. Cazien fell back, inspecting the line of men as I kept us on the right path. I had my own thoughts to struggle with. I wanted to laugh at the ridiculousness of it.

Cazien had killed the woman he'd loved, had planned to marry, because she'd betrayed him.

And now, here I was, ordered to do something similar. At least there were no feelings involved. It wouldn't be the same. I wouldn't love him when I killed him, and he wouldn't be killed by a woman he'd given his heart to.

I pushed away every thought he'd inspired in me—the softer Cazien who teased me and showed me a world of pleasure, until I only saw him as Cazien, the client and mark of the Hallows. A dangerous man I may be ordered to kill. Painstakingly, I reminded myself of every instance I'd been hurt or betrayed by someone.

It took until we stopped for the night, but when Cazien sat near me around the small fire someone had made, my walls were firmly back in place.

When it was time to retire for the night, I was grateful to be sharing a tent with Cazien despite the distance I tried to cleave. Juns sent me glares all evening, and had we been in Constinbul, I wouldn't have cared.

But out here in the wild of Aeaea, where the air was sticky, loud with the calls of bugs, birds, and the snapping of twigs from passing animals—everyone was on edge already and there was nothing to take it out on.

When I ducked into the tent, there were at least both of our bedrolls. Cazien still sat at the fire, Durnth having pulled him into a conversation about the turmoil in the capital. I'd taken it as a sign to retire early, and when Durnth had seen me walking towards the shared tent, he winked at me.

I ignored the nausea and guilt and inclined my head.

Inside the tent, the conditions weren't much better. The canvas trapped the tropical heat, but at least the flap had been tightly shut and there weren't any flying insects. The fire outside provided the only illumination, making the front wall glow, and shadows tossed in a macabre dance. I wanted nothing more than to peel off my damp clothes and sleep naked, but I'd rather feel suffocated than be taken by surprise.

I lay on top of my bedroll, the other less than an arm span away against the other wall. I'd needed to hunch over to move within the tent, and wondered if Cazien would simply drop to his knees and crawl.

I flopped over onto my side, staring at the faintly illuminated wall, thinking of anything but Cazien crawling towards me. The conversations outside blended into the sounds of the jungle, and I slipped into a half doze.

About an hour later, Cazien finally slipped into our tent and I tensed. Refusing to roll over and see how he handled the height of the tent, I squeezed my eyes shut, pretending to be deeply asleep. If he knew I was awake, he at least let me pretend.

I couldn't kill him.

The thought threw me wide awake.

I had never been an assassin for Durnth. I only killed when my life was in danger. And Cazien... he might not be a nice man, but he wasn't a bad man, no matter how he tried to act otherwise.

I strained to hear his even breathing, wanting to cross the short distance my walls and my words had created today. I would warn him about Durnth. I could tell him Durnth's plan was new. Or I could fail to guide him to the treasure.

Could I stall the entire journey for eight more weeks? Or could we stay out here for the four weeks, and then convince Cazien the map was wrong?

The light of the fire had dwindled to hardly more than embers, hardly enough to make the canvas of the tents glow. A flickering shadow, distorted from the breeze, slinked quietly along the side of the tent. I reached for the dagger lying beside my bedroll, gripping it, my heart loud in my ears.

It could be one of the men taking a piss, I tried to tell myself. It's not Juns. Even he wasn't that stupid to try to get back at me that soon.

It stopped, and I eased onto my back, ready to get to my knees. A quiet click of the tongue made me peer across the tent. Cazien already crouched, twin daggers in his hand. A twin shadow splayed out on his side of the tent.

What the hell was going on?

I could barely make out Cazien's features in the dark, but I knew he felt the same grim determination. I rose onto my feet, staying crouched, our backs angled towards each other.

He shifted closer to the entrance, shielding me behind his larger form.

The sounds of the jungle night disappeared. We both watched as a blade slid under the flap of the tent, as slow as an adder slipping between bedsheets, a hand curling around the fabric, preparing to open it.

Fear rattled in my chest. I hated fighting, though I'd fight like a demon of Agni's fires when forced into one.

The flap pulled back, the soft glow of the fire blocked by the man at the front. He must not be able to see into the darker tent, and I refused to move or even breath. Nothing to give us away.

He eased forward, the darkness making it impossible to recognize him. If I couldn't see Cazien, I'd believe myself alone with how perfectly he blended into the shadows.

The man grew more confident, believing himself undetected so far, and slid more of himself inside. The two shadows moved towards the front, blocking out all light from the fire.

Who was on duty that evening? Cazien had assigned a watch list. I'd take my turn tomorrow.

When the figure hunched down, stepping forward, Cazien struck. The man cried out as Cazien's blade went through his wrist, the cry turning into a gurgle as Cazien's other dagger found its way into his chest.

The two other men tried to rush in but the tent was too small for them to be effective, especially with the first man dying in the entrance. Cazien shouldered the men outward, pushing them both towards the fire.

I scrambled out after him, refusing to let him take them on his own.

There weren't only two. Half of the men were out there, their blades brandished.

Cazien grabbed the still stumbling man by a fistful of hair, yanking him upright before slicing his dagger through the man's neck, sending a fan of dark blood towards the others. No sign of Durnth.

I lunged for the other attacker, who'd righted himself. He wasn't a Hallows, but my brief glimpse told me it was an even blend. The man leered at me, and I snarled. He swung and I stepped out of the way. He outweighed me, but was slow. He relied too much on strength.

When he cut through the air with his dagger, I stepped back again, but then rushed him, dagger aimed for his chest. His thick forearm blocked it, and it rattled me.

Gritting my teeth, I released the dagger, dropping it into my free hand, and driving it into his thigh, cutting through the thick vein.

He cried out, and I had to rush backwards to avoid his weight taking me down. He wasn't dead yet, but he'd bleed out soon enough.

Cazien had three others engaged, and the others began to slink around the fire towards me, identifying me as the much easier target.

I moved backwards, adjusting my grip, and waited. Cazien was silent as he fought—a demon of death in the dark, the fire lighting the sharp planes of his face. I was glad he was at my back instead of on the other side of the blade.

Two men rushed me, and I went on the defensive. I wasn't an experienced fighter, not like these men. But I was an expert at staying alive.

Wherever they struck, I was no longer there. My own strikes weren't aimed to kill; instead I focused on cutting them as many times as I could. The more blows I landed, the angrier and more in pain they grew.

The left one charged forward, a curse on his lips, and I jumped away—right into the path of the other.

An arm came around my waist, lifting me off the ground, swinging me around with a roar.

Cazien.

He released me, his blade already hilt deep in the first man's throat. He ripped it out the side of the man's neck, cleaving downwards across the second man's stomach in one fluid move.

I had no moment to be sick as I watched the man's guts spill outward. Not when there were still more coming.

The remaining five men focused on Cazien, two braver men stepping forward with their swords. Their blades gave them better reach compared to our daggers, but my money would be on Cazien even if we were unarmed.

They rushed him, roaring loud enough that the rest of the crew had to know what was going on. Faces began to look out of tents, terror and confusion on their faces. Some went right back in, hoping to avoid being caught in the fight.

Where the hell was Durnth?

Cazien grunted and I whirled to see one of the opponents with a smug grin. Cazien's sleeve was sliced

open, red staining the white fabric.

I growled.

As the second man engaged Cazien, trying to press an advantage, I charged. They'd dismissed me, hardly dangerous compared to Cazien.

But I wasn't harmless.

Cazien moved gracefully, no chaos to his style of battle, and when his arm came up in a strike, I followed, trailing in his wake, rising in the shocked man's face. He had no time to react to my appearance before my dagger carved between his ribs and out his side.

When I looked up, Durnth and another had appeared, their blades sticking out of the remaining men.

Cazien grunted, and I looked back to see him wiping his blade on the dead man's tunic.

"Nice of you to finally join us," I said, teeth clenched, at Durnth as he approached.

"I was taking a shit," he said with a shrug. "What do you reckon this was about?" He nudged the boot of one of the dead men.

"I'll ask you the same, considering half were your men." Cazien stood in a position as if he were prepared to keep fighting.

"And half were the men your brother hired," Durnth replied, crossing his arms over his barrel chest. "This had nothing to do with me, if that's what you're thinking."

It is what I was thinking. Durnth met my eyes with a hard glare, daring me to say something. I looked away first.

Cazien spat on the ground, away from Durnth, and his lip had been split. My lungs burned, and I wanted to drop

on my ass and guzzle water but Cazien wasn't even out of breath. He didn't even look angry—just annoyed.

"Usually, greedy bastards don't make their move until the payout is guaranteed." Cazien turned towards the other tents, men finally coming out now that it was over. "Get your lazy asses up and haul the bodies away. It's your lucky night. Your pay just increased."

No one uttered a single cheer.

"Next time one of you thinks about killing me, at least have the balls to do it to my face." He turned on his heel and marched towards the supply packs.

I looked towards Durnth again, but he'd already started barking orders, streamlining the disposal. I followed Cazien, my foot catching on something. I looked down and saw Juns, his eyes glazed and unseeing. I spat on him, satisfied when it landed on his slack cheek.

Not even a full day and our party numbers had been halved. As I made my way to Cazien and the medical supplies he'd pulled out, I wondered if the gods and King Xanu laughed at us.

## CHAPTER TWELVE



**I**t took two more days to arrive at the first village. Two days of tense riding, and two days where Durnth didn't give me a chance to be alone with Cazien. With half of us gone already, and no one trusting the other half, everyone took frequent watches.

It meant that I didn't have to be tortured by Cazien's presence in the tent, but it also meant that I didn't have a chance to speak with him.

Because I was almost certain Durnth had a hand in the attack.

The village filled a pocket cleared of trees and pressed against one of the volcano ridges. There was a well in the center, and five small huts. The only other building was an open-sided pavilion, which looked large enough to hold all of the people of the village and not a single person more.

"Have you been to this one?" Cazien's tone was brisk. Ever since he'd told me about his former fiancée and the attack on our tent, I'd yet to see the softer Cazien reappear.

"Twice," I answered, nudging Cian ahead as a stooped older man ventured to meet us. The rest of the people were

either out hunting or hiding in their huts. I raised my hand in greeting. "Greetings, elder. Peace upon your homes. We seek nothing more than rest and to share our tales." I thought hard for the name I'd learned years ago. It was likely wrong, but names were common enough outside of the wall that I had a chance. "Are you Elder Caliem?"

The man cocked his head, leaning both hands on the top of his walking stick as he inspected us. "Caliem was the elder of another village. I am Sanaty. I do not recognize you."

I dismounted, handing the reins up to Cazien, who watched the scene and kept an eye on the woods around us. I stepped forward until I was out of range of the man's stick. I bowed, my hand over my heart. "When I was a girl, I traveled Aeaea with my father. I come now, leading this man"—I gestured behind me—"to explore the wilds of my home."

Sanaty peered over my shoulder at Cazien, the elder's honey-colored eyes taking in every detail. The man's body may have been warped with age, but his eyes were sharp. He looked back at me, peering closely.

"You've got a familiar look to you," he said, and gestured with his head towards the pavilion. "You are welcome for the evening, travelers. We do not have wealth, and if you wish to take our women, we will fight for them."

"Elder Sanaty," Cazien said, "if one of these men lays a hand on your people, I will kill him myself."

Sanaty gave him an assessing look and nodded. I took back the reins of Cian and we followed the elder across the short clearing and under the pavilion.

The roof was thatched with palm fronds, the long green boughs laying over the eves, giving a small respite from the Aeaean sun. There was no respite from the humidity, though. In Constinbul, at least the humidity was rare.

The rest of the men followed, tying the ponies to the pavilion posts at the direction of the elder. Cazien loosely tied the reins of both Nixus and Cian over their pommels, issuing them a command. Neither went as stiff as Nixus had the first time I'd seen her commanded by him, and now they moved beyond the ponies, mouthing the ground for the green grass there.

"They won't wander," Cazien said when he caught me looking. He faced the elder and gestured to the ponies. "We have already lost many of our party. Now we have more beasts than necessary. I will pay handsomely if one of your own will return some to Grotto."

"And how did you lose these men? The area between here and the wall is not as dangerous as other parts."

"From their own stupidity," I answered for him, not hiding the disgust in my tone.

Sanaty accepted that, his lips pressed into a hard line. Stupidity killed out here more often than the animals.

A harsh cry rent the air and Cazien stepped out into the clearing, his arm raised towards the sky. The men gasped, as did some of the villagers who'd ventured to the front of their homes. Zypher dove towards him with another cry. The golden eagle's claws wrapped carefully around Cazien's forearm, the same one that was injured, but other than a wince, Cazien showed no other strain. He slipped the paper from a leather tube at the eagle's leg and threw his

arm upwards, letting Zypher find a new perch on the pavilion.

He opened the rolled parchment, scanning it quickly, nodding once. He looked up to me, as if he knew I'd be waiting for word from his brother as well.

"They've scouted the first beach. As suspected, it's not a good candidate."

He took a pen from the pack inside the pavilion and scrawled out a response. Again, when he lifted his arm, Zypher flew to him and Cazien returned the parchment to the leather tube.

I watched the eagle launch into the sky, quickly disappearing over the tall canopy of trees. I frowned, the clouds spiraling tightly in the air—a promise of a storm.

Sanaty followed my gaze. "A good night to not be outside."

I nodded, remembering the storms of Aeaea. "My mother told me that Agni and Sedus battle in these storms." Cazien cocked his head, and I shook mine. "We aren't going to find the treasure in the sky, Cazien."

"Treasure?" The elder looked intrigued, but only passably so.

"He chases adventure." I nodded towards Cazien. "Thinks that King Xanu's lost treasure is somewhere on Aeaea. Since he is paying me handsomely, I've agreed to guide him around the island."

The elder studied Cazien again, and instead of laughing at what we sought, he narrowed his eyes. "There is a story my family has told. Perhaps if you would join me for dinner, I can tell you it."

A story—tales passed down regarding treasure was exactly what I'd hoped we'd find in these villages.

"We would be honored to join your hearth," Cazien said, his fist over his heart. My mouth quirked upwards, surprised that he knew the gesture. More likely he was a quick study.

The elder gestured to the pack animals. "Separate out which you wish to be returned to the city, and when the storm passes, we will see to it."

The men saw the darkening clouds and added urgency to their steps. Both Cazien and I helped to unload the ponies and sort through the extra supplies.

"Keep the blankets and ropes," I told him. "If we meet the Kanoi, they may accept them as bribes. If not, they make good trade in other villages. Same with any boots."

"Not the weapons?"

I shot him a grin and drawled, "Do you really want to give a tribe weapons which then might be used against you later?"

He tilted his head in agreement and continued to sort the gear.

I kept busy, recoiling rope as I looked for Durnth. He was on the other side of the pavilion, his back turned to us.

"Cazien," I said, dropping my voice low. I kept my eyes on the gear in front of us.

He grunted in question, sliding a dagger from a sheath then discarding it with a sound of disgust. I sympathized—most of the blades were of poor quality.

"I think Durnth had a hand in the first night."

Cazien stilled beside me but thankfully he didn't turn to look at me. A few moments stretched out, and I kept coiling the rope, palm over elbow.

"Why?"

Because he told me of his plan to steal the treasure from you? Because he's a greedy son of a bitch—well, that wasn't entirely fair. For all I knew, Durnth's mother was a sweet woman and it was his father's fault Durnth was black inside.

I couldn't tell him about Durnth's plan right now, not in front of everyone. I really didn't want to have to fight off another ten men, plus Durnth. Especially not if it could involve the innocent people around us.

"Just don't trust"—I looked up when a shadow fell over me, and I grimaced at Durnth—"shitty steel. Right, boss?"

Durnth looked at the blades Cazien has discarded, toeing a few with his boot. "Steel that looks like shit is shit. And a man who can't take care of his knife ain't worth much in a fight."

Cazien rose, and to his credit, didn't look at Durnth any differently than before. "I think we figured that out the night of their attempted ambush. You find out if any of the other men knew about it?"

I rose too, Durnth glancing over to me. I kept my face hard. I didn't know, not without a doubt, that Durnth had planned it—or at least encouraged it. But I wasn't going to let Durnth think I was on Cazien's side either.

"It was probably Juns," I said, hands on my hips. Cazien gave me a sidelong glance. Durnth nodded.

"Aye," he said. "From what I've gathered, there was talk about our lovely guide here. Seems like Juns took more

exception to the insults than I'd thought."

I raised an eyebrow. "So it wasn't a rebellion?"

Durnth snorted. "Don't think so highly of yourself, girl. Yes, they wanted a few pounds of your flesh. But the others saw an opportunity. They knew they'd have to get through Cazien to get you, so why not two birds one stone?"

Cazien growled and Durnth inclined his head towards him. "That's what I mean." He crossed his arms. "We got eyes, Talon. And I know Min's picky about who she lets in her bed, but this many men in a group? Better to have no women at all. Add in a single quim, and they get restless."

I snarled, but Cazien moved before I could. He grabbed a fistful of Durnth's shirt, hauling him onto his toes. Durnth, to his credit, didn't panic, but glared right back at Cazien.

"Let me make it clear, right now, Durnth." Cazien's voice was cold and low. So low and possessive, it curled through me, softening my own anger. "Minerva and I haven't fucked. She stays with me to keep those dogs away from her. Do I need to make an example of one of them? I would rather slit their throats and continue this journey with only Minerva at my back than let one of them paw a woman who doesn't want it."

Durnth held up his hands in surrender and Cazien released him. Durnth straightened his tunic with a scowl. That look had sent many people to their knees, begging for mercy. "Those dogs are here for a reason, Talon. Don't you forget."

Cazien raised an eyebrow. "Do I need to neuter you first? Because I know you're not stupid enough to threaten me."

"You tell me who to bark at and I will," the man replied easily. "I'll go make sure they stay away from the huts and keep to the pavilion." A fat raindrop landed on the man's forehead and it was followed by a downpour.

Cazien whistled sharply to Cian and Nixus, who trotted over. Rain soaked through our clothes in seconds, and it felt glorious compared to the heat and humidity minutes before. At least this gave a break from the heat. Once it was over, we'd need to make a fire to dry everything, because it'd never dry on its own. That was later's problem.

I pulled off Cian's gear, hauling the heavy saddle and thick blanket into the safety of the pavilion. Then I was back, brush in hand, to work the mare over. She leaned into the strokes, shaking her head when the rain fell in her eyes.

"At least you're getting clean," I said to her, and her ear flicked back to listen. "No dirt here for you to roll in, but this will help. The bugs won't come back for a while after a heavy rain like this."

Cian stood still while I finished brushing her, checking her where the saddle lay for any sores or abrasions.

A crack of thunder overhead startled us all, horses included. The ponies whinnied, Nixus blew out an irritated breath. Cazien patted her nose, whispering something I couldn't hear over the growing storm. Cazien guided the horses to the back of the pavilion, where they'd stay mostly dry for the night.

Sanaty gestured for me to join him at his hut, and men from the other huts hustled forward, fire supplies in hand for the fire pit with the men. At least they wouldn't be chilled through from the rain, despite it being warm.

The elder's hut was surprisingly large. It was spacious enough to hold multiple thick cushions for seating around a central fire pit, and a kitchen off to the side with its own separate cooking hearth built into the mud brick walls.

Beyond the main room, it had two other rooms. One was a loft above the main room, clearly Sanaty and his wife's room, and another one off the back wall. He saw me looking at the door, covered by a thick tapestry.

"It was my daughter's room." His words were filled with grief.

"What happened, elder?" It was customary, from what I remembered, to inquire. The villages were spread apart, but people still cared about the other families.

"Kanoi, three moons ago. She was fishing, with some from another village, when they attacked."

"May they rest in the comfort of Agni."

"Thank you."

Cazien joined us, taking in the small room, before offering me a pack. "Our bedrolls got soaked, but at least we'll have dry clothes to sleep in."

"You can change in the room," Sanaty said. "And sleep there tonight while your bedrolls dry. My wife will be returning soon no doubt, and then we shall share food and stories."

We slipped into the room, which was half the size of the front room. I could touch both mud-packed walls without extending my arms much, but at least the room was long enough for Cazien to have a few extra feet of space.

There was a pile of thick blankets, which we could lay out on the hard packed floor to sleep on. The single window

was covered with a shutter woven from vines, but enough light shone through for us to be able to see enough to dress.

I wasn't shy when it came to dressing in front of others. I hid my lack of experience, and couldn't always look for a place out of view to change. Still, changing in front of Cazien made my stomach clench. It made me think of the inn, and how his rough hands felt on my skin. How his fingers felt in me. How he felt, my hand wrapped around him.

Glaring at the floor, I pulled off my rain-slogged clothing until I was naked. My back was to him, but I could hear him pulling off his own clothes. I forewent the breastband and underwear, opting instead for the dry leggings and long-sleeve tunic. It'd be too hot during the day, but Aeanean nights after storms tended to be cold.

When I turned, reaching for a fresh pair of socks, Cazien was watching me, only dressed in fresh pants. Rainwater clung to his soft chest hairs, and my mouth went dry as I watched a drop roll down the flat planes of his stomach. I brought my eyes back to his, and something changed between us.

He caught me around the waist, but I was already reaching for his face, and he hauled me against him, our mouths finding each other's.

He growled, the sound barely covered by the rolling thunder outside. I could feel it vibrating his chest, making that primitive part of me respond. His hair was soaked, plastered to his head and I grabbed fistfuls of it, keeping him close.

Cazien's kiss was unrelenting but I didn't surrender. I pressed back, fighting for dominance. He gave no ground, even as his hands slid from my waist to my ass, gripping me tight.

I wanted him to make me feel the same way he did in the inn. Shameless, I ground against the length with my stomach. He pulled back, resting his forehead against mine. Our eyes met, and I was a heartbeat from kissing him again.

A woman's voice carried over the thunder and through the tapestry door, and a shuddered breath slipped from my lips. Grateful for the reminder of where we were, as guests, I stepped back from him. His fingers slid over me, him as loath to let go as I was.

He caught my hand and brought my fingers to his lips. My stomach flipped at the lust in his eyes.

"I may not be sharing your bed yet, darling, but soon I will," he promised. "And, damn it all, I think I look forward to it more than finding Xanu's treasure."

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Tessopia, Sanaty's wife, was a cheerful woman and even Cazien couldn't hold back a smile as she teased her husband with clear affection. The love the two elders held for each other, even so many years and hardships later, was evident.

"And why are you not married?" Tessopia was also frank, but she had such a kind face that it was impossible to find offense. She was directing the question to me and I hurried to swallow the pork in my mouth.

"I'm too much for a man to handle," I said loftily, and Cazien snorted beside me. I ignored him, staring at my bowl as I stirred the cooked grains and pork around. "My parents loved each other"—I looked up at our hosts—"you two love each other. I wouldn't want anything less than that in my marriage. If I cannot have that level of love, I won't marry at all."

Tessopia reached over from where she sat beside me, her work-hardened hand patting my wrist. "Love is like Aeaea, child."

I frowned, tilting my head.

She gestured upwards, indicating the island.

"Aeaea is full of hills and valleys, of dark places and meadows of light. To survive outside of the wall, it is work. Love is work, Minerva. The first shoots of love grow quickly, but if left untended, the love will begin to fail. To keep love strong, both people must tend to it. Keep it watered, keep it fed, protect it from forces which would harm it."

"It is the only way love can survive for so many years. If it is not tended, then its roots will never grow deep enough to withstand the fury of Agni or the wrath of Sedus."

Sanaty rubbed his wife's shoulder, watching her with fondness. "It is why we can still love even after the loss of our daughter."

I really had nothing else to say. I believed what they said, but my life didn't allow for much tending of hearts.

"Will you tell us what you know of the Lost King's treasure?"

I could kiss Cazien for the change in topic. Sanaty took his wife's bowl along with his own and returned it to the kitchen area before sitting once more on a cushion near the fire pit.

"It is not much of a story," the elder admitted. "It has been passed down through my family for generations. No doubt it once invoked images of an ancient Aeaea and a fierce king. But now there is little detail left."

I set my bowl down beside my cushion. "We'd be interested in hearing it, nonetheless."

He nodded, looking between Cazien and me. "When the island was still young, Agni and Sedus battled often. There were not as many great spears surrounding the island, but

because the beach was easier to reach didn't mean the island was any safer for mortals. It made the island dangerous, but a safe haven for those willing to risk the battlefields of gods."

I grinned. "Like King Xanu."

"Precisely." Sanaty nodded. Tessopia left, going to the small stove and preparing mint tea. "Though the name was lost to time, so I cannot tell you if it was him."

"The Lost King's treasure is said to be as large as a dozen dragon hoards," Cazien pressed, dismissing any possibility it could be a different person. "What do your stories say about that?"

Tessopia handed me a mug, painted white with colorful flowers. It was handmade, the details lacking perfection but clearly done with love. She saw my inspection. "My daughter would paint anything she could."

"It's beautiful." I took a sip of the mint tea, almost too hot to drink. "Thank you." I turned my attention back to the men.

"The story says that the man risked desolation to hide his treasure—"

"Desolation?" Cazien looked at me, eyes shrewd. My own were wide. To Sanaty, he said, "I have a map. And with the map was a single passage: Descend through desolation when Sedus conquers the beasts of Agni."

"We weren't sure what desolation referred to, since so much of this island has been decimated at one point or another in its history," I added.

Tessopia tutted, and Sanaty gave her an encouraging look. "The people who live outside the walls do not count

the paths of Agni's fire as desolation. There is and has been only one place we call the desolation."

I swore and Cazien's eyes narrowed at me. "What?"

"Do you have the map on you?"

"Always."

He pulled it out, settling between Tessopia and myself on the hard packed floor. The fire's light danced over it, giving the faded map an unnatural depth in its dark lines.

"Here," I pointed to the limestone canyons, and looked at the woman. "This is one of the places we planned to investigate."

"That's on the other side of the island." Cazien's voice was soft. "We would have made it there last before our return to Grotto."

Sanaty gestured to the map. "May I?"

Cazien hesitated, his distrust of everyone around him warring with his need for information. He handed the old map to the elder.

"You made these marks?" he asked, the map settled on his thighs. He didn't expect an answer, looking between the map and the fire in front of us.

Nerves rose in my own throat. Was he going to toss it in the fire? Burn it for the protection of the treasure? "What is it?"

"Who was your father, Minerva?"

I blinked. "Alec Remon."

The elder looked at me. "I remember him, and you. Though he never stayed long in this village. We had no goods to trade at that time. He trained you in mapmaking, did he not?"

"He was, before he died. I never finished."

Sanaty handed the map to me. "What do you remember about different inks?"

Cazien's stare was a mountain pressing down on me. My eyes skittered over the map, seeing it without really seeing it as I hunted my memories. There were so many different inks, most of them newer in the sense of history. Some were ancient recipes though, used by priests and priestesses to protect their holy secrets.

I held the map up in front of me, letting the fire shine through from behind.

The entire map transformed.

It was still Aeaea, but there was so much more detail. I looked right at the limestone canyons and, close to where Cazien had marked, was the depiction of a cave, with the word "descend" above it.

Cazien grabbed one side of the paper and I trailed my finger down the white path revealed by the fire. Sanaty and Tessopia were completely forgotten as we took in the new information.

"It's a cave network." Cazien sounded awed.

"Look." I pointed towards the mountain in the center of the map. "Not caves. Lava tubes. All over the island. All of them reaching the ocean."

Cazien's face was alight with joy and my heart seized as I looked at him. And when he turned to me, there was hope in his eyes.

"Agni and Sedus can still battle under the island."

"And we can get under the island through the cave." I reflected the hope in his voice; it was impossible to not be

pulled in by him.

Cazien turned back to the map. “How do we know which way to go? There’s no trail marked.”

Sanaty cleared his throat, and it was like the storm itself settled in to listen. “There is a part of my family’s story which always fascinated me as a child, and still to this day. If I were young and strong, I would beg to come with you.” Tessopia patted his thigh affectionately. “It is said that the man cursed the tunnels that protected his treasure. That those who dwelled in the light would be doomed to die in the heart of Agni’s lair, joining his phantom army. But—if one experienced true darkness, the king himself would lead them to his legacy.”

“That’s not ominous in the least.” Cazien snorted at my sarcasm. “Any other clues your family stories might have for us?”

“I’ve told you everything that was passed from my father.” Sanaty’s eyes twinkled in the firelight. “Regarding this matter, that is.”

The elder groaned as he rose, his wife behind him. “The storm makes my bones ache. We’ll take our leave of you for the evening.”

We bid them goodnight, and together stared at the map we’d barely lowered. It was as if the map would become ordinary again if we let the firelight disappear from it, never again showing us the way. The hosts settled into their loft, the thunder rumbling in the distance, the heavy rain hitting the thatched roof, and under it all was the sound of the small fire crackling and popping.

Cazien lowered the map, and I let it go as he began to fold it. Neither of us spoke as we stared into the fire, the folded map between his hands, his face washed of any expression.

I was held captive by him as he was held by the flames.

If Durnth learned the truth of the map, it would be all he needed to overwhelm Cazien. And from the display of prowess he'd shown in combat the first night beyond the wall, my role would be vital to him.

Durnth had to know that he couldn't take Cazien with what men remained, especially if not all of them backed Durnth. He'd need me, and if I didn't play his game, Durnth would compromise Cazien another way.

I would get close to Cazien; but not to turn traitor. I'd keep Cazien safe, get him away from Durnth before the man could turn. I needed Cazien to trust me, really trust me.

Guilt beat at my shoulders, like the rain beat at the hut. I could tell him, but if I did, Cazien would kill them all and likely abandon the search. Would that be so bad though?

"We should get some sleep." Cazien didn't sound tired at all.

I smiled, a small uptick of the side of my mouth. "You sound like you'd rather head out tonight now that we have a real destination."

He snorted. "Don't tempt me." He offered me a hand and I ignored it, rising on my own. "If I thought the storm had any chance of clearing tonight, I'd be kicking those men's asses into gear."

I ducked under the tapestry into the small room, pitch-black except for the light from the fire pit. We could have asked for an oil lamp, or candle even, but it would have felt like a waste of what little they had.

"No, you wouldn't," I whispered as I began to lay out the blankets. Cazien dropped the tapestry in place, blocking the light from the fire except for what peeked under the bottom hem.

"Hmm?" He laid out blankets as well, not at all making a fuss about sleeping on the ground in a hut.

I kicked off my boots, setting them as neatly as I could against the wall nearest the door before climbing onto my blanket next to the far wall. It hadn't escaped me how Cazien claimed the space between myself and the door.

"You wouldn't force them to march in weather like this," I said. "You're too good of a man."

This time he laughed, harsh and abrupt. "I don't think I've ever been accused of being a good man before, darling."

I felt more than saw him settle down on his back. He was even closer to me here than in the tent we shared.

"You never told me why you're really looking for the lost treasure."

I was met with silence and wondered if I'd stepped over a line. He knew I didn't believe he was only doing it for fame and fortune. New thunder rolled overhead, a second storm racing to meet the other. We'd be walking in the last of the rain tomorrow, no doubt.

I couldn't hear Cazien and I wondered if he'd fallen asleep. I jumped when he spoke at last.

"I have three brothers. You've met Gavret, and heard of Brannen. Morgan is the only sister, closest in age. Viridian was—is the baby. He was born when I was almost ten."

I didn't dare say anything, fearing if I made so much as a sound, he'd close this wall he'd lowered.

"Viridian was a reader," he said, fondness in his voice. "Our father hated it. Tried to beat him into becoming a warrior. Viridian"—he sighed—"he showed us why he hardly had to train. He was a damned natural with the sword, like he'd been born to it. He snapped finally, and beat our father so soundly, breaking his sword arm, that the man hardly looked at him after."

I blinked, despite not being able to see. If Cazien was as good as I knew him to be, and he spoke of his younger brother as even better? I shook the thoughts clear of my head.

"His curiosity was never satisfied." Cazien's voice took on a strange disconnect, a pain so clear underneath his words that I found myself lying down at last and reaching for his hand. His hand twitched, as if he hadn't expected it and I wondered if his pride would demand he pull away. Two heartbeats later, his thumb began to move in circles on the back of my hand, like he was drawing on my strength. I held firmly, channeling it towards him.

"He was with Brannen when it happened. They took a dangerous route, through lands the fae had been causing trouble in. Brannen was enchanted, made to sleep deeply. When he woke up, Viridian was gone."

It was all I could do to run my thumb over his hand, soothing the grief in his words.

"My brother searched—he blew off the visit that had sent them traveling in the first place. It was nearly a political scandal. But all he could find was Viridian's cloak."

I swallowed, wetting my lips. I rose up on an elbow, looking towards him in the dark. "Did you ever learn what happened?"

"My brother found a witch, who scried for him." Cazien released my hand, and to my surprise, guided me back down, but this time he pulled me towards him, letting me pillow my head on his chest.

"The king of giants had tricked him." Cazien's voice rumbled, raw and grave, in his chest under my ear. His heat melted into me, relaxing me despite the topic of conversation. "He took Viridian back to his realm, a slave for seven years. He was taken five years ago."

I let out a long breath. Five years trapped in the fae realm. On the last day of the seventh year, Viridian could leave, his service up. But fae were notorious for their tricks, and many never knew until it was too late that their day of freedom was approaching.

I looked up towards him, the scent of mint tea and his natural scent of spice and sage relaxing me as well as his body heat. "And the treasure?"

Cazien laced his fingers with mine again, holding me to him. There was no seduction in his grasp; no arrogance and sly smirks or winks. It was as if he needed to hold on to me, that I was an anchor as he was pulled back by the tide of loss.

"The same witch later came to the family estate, and said she'd had a vision. That Viridian would be in great peril if

we did not rescue him before the last day of his seventh year. She couldn't see his future beyond that day. She only knew that he would be in danger from the giant king and his armies." I pressed my lips to his chest as he sucked in a breath. "I was the only one home. I demanded to know how to save him. There is a relic, of the first of the gods, in King Xanu's hoard. I don't know if he knew what it was when he put it there, or if he thought it was another piece of treasure. She said that it's a piece of Ymir, the father of all giants."

"And the fae all seek connections to the first ones," I whispered in awe. "If he had that, it would mean no other giant could ever challenge him for his throne."

Cazien's jaw brushed against me as he nodded. "Exactly. Since that day, I've been looking for it. The only time I hadn't was when I'd returned home to marry Nuria."

And I'd accused him of traveling the world for fighting and fucking. He must have sensed how my heart fell, as he squeezed me.

He rolled on top of me, bracing himself on his arms on either side of my shoulders. My hands went to his chest, but I wanted him close.

"So. That's what I want," he said, his nose brushing mine. "From the treasure. I don't give a fuck about the rest of it. Resuld and Durnth could take it all, so long as I get that one piece."

That's it. That's how I could protect Cazien. I could tell Durnth Cazien is looking for a relic, lie about what it is, and tell him Cazien doesn't care about the rest of it.

"We'll find it," I whispered, my fingers gripping his chest.  
"You'll rescue your brother, Cazien."

He kissed me and I gave myself over to it. The Hallows wouldn't need to betray Cazien. Not now.

Cazien's hands found mine again and pinned them at my sides as his mouth burned its way down my neck.

"Cazien," I sighed out his name, a weak protest, hardly louder than the rain outside. The woven shutters flashed when lightning raced across the sky, thunder on its heels.

"Let me do this, please."

I looked down, and lightning flashed again, this time so much closer. It illuminated his face for a fraction of a second. But in that moment, his vulnerability was clear, how he'd dragged his grief and pain to the surface to show me that there was more to him than being the bane of demons. How much he needed what I could give him in that moment.

I relaxed under him, pushing away the insecurities that came from inexperience.

Because, even as it felt like taking advantage of his pain, I wanted it too. I wanted what he could make me feel.

He felt me loosen, and I slipped one hand from his grasp. I brushed his hair with my fingers, teasing it loose from the bun he'd tied it in. His hair was so damn soft and thick, I could stroke it for hours.

He turned his head towards my palm, placing a kiss against my skin with a tenderness that made my breath catch in my throat.

Cazien raised himself up to trace his lips over mine. He kissed me with the same tenderness. The raging fire he'd

shown me before was gone. In its place was a new feeling, no less hot but instead of a wildfire, it reminded me of a warm hearth in the middle of a winter storm. Just as much heat, but none of the chaos. It was a fire that embraced rather than burned.

When his hand grazed my bare stomach, my focus was torn between the rough pads of his fingers and the dizzying kisses of his mouth. He pushed my shirt up higher, and I arched my back to sit up. He kept me pinned, though, raising my shirt up above my breasts but no further.

When his lips wrapped around a nipple, I bit my lip, trapping the moan there. Even if the thunder would cover it, I couldn't bear the idea of our hosts hearing us. Especially after Cazien's confrontation with Durnth about not sharing my bed.

And, I noticed, his every touch felt so much more intense as I tried to hide what he was doing to me.

My cheeks burned so much that I was amazed I wasn't lighting up the room.

He kissed, and licked, and bit, and sucked every last spot of my breasts until I was a panting writhing mess under him. How was it possible for my core to feel so desperate from him only giving my breasts his undivided attention?

It wasn't lust alone he built in my core. His tenderness, his comforting heat of need and desire made a similar affection grow behind my ribs. I wanted the intense heat he'd inspired in me at the inn. But I also craved this—the touches against my heart and soul.

Cazien kissed his way down my stomach, his hands dragging down my sides until his fingers could hook in my

waistband. I raised my hips and he pulled my leggings down and off of me, discarding them somewhere in the dark.

The lightning grew more intense, the thunder nearly constant and filling the small room we shared. The sound was nothing compared to the thunder of my heart in my ears.

I caught the dark shape of him, kneeling between my legs, his hands resting on my knees. The lightning gave me stolen moments of his shadowed face. He must have felt my look, as the next time lightning flashed—his eyes met mine.

His eyes ripped the very breath from my lungs and froze me in place.

Cazien's hands slid down my thighs, so perilously close to where I wanted him. I could feel how slick my thighs had gotten from his attention on my breasts and I squirmed. What if he thought worse of me, for being so easily and intensely aroused?

His hands gripped my thighs, halting me in place.

He moved slowly, his dark form curling over me like a damned snake in the night. I expected his mouth on my stomach again, and I wanted his mouth back on my breasts. They ached from his earlier attention and I needed more of it. It should have terrified me how much I needed it.

When he first licked my sex, I gasped and slapped my hand over my mouth. I'd heard this described by women as they gossiped. How some men were laughably terrible at it, if they even did it at all, but sometimes women would grin and brag about their partner's skills. It had, frankly, not sounded like anything I'd be interested in. But from that first touch, my entire opinion changed. And his third lick

had me deciding Cazien fell into the category of men who were very, very good.

He held my thighs open as he tasted me slowly, as if savoring every touch, and I could already feel my climax building.

"You taste so damn good, darling." His voice was guttural, and the endearment made me moan against my own hand. I would never, never be able to hear him call me that again without thinking of this moment.

He nipped the inside of my thigh before soothing the sharp pain with his tongue. "When this is all over, I'm going to lay you out in a bed and do this to you, over and over. And you won't have to hold back your beautiful voice. I want to be surrounded by your taste, and your sounds, and then, when I can't bear it any longer, I'll make you come around my cock."

The fantasy he struck sent my arousal higher and he lowered his lips back to me. This time he wasn't reserved in his touch. Cazien devoured me like a dying man and I was his salvation.

My climax rushed towards me, overwhelming me. I clapped my mouth shut, my hand still covering my lips, as a moan stuck in my throat. I ground against his face, and I would have been embarrassed had I not felt his growl of approval.

He gentled his touch, kissing the inside of my thighs as my heart settled.

I let out a pleased sigh and reached down to run my fingers through his hair.

Then, Cazien started again.

I could do nothing except surrender to his touch. I bit my lip, my eyes squeezed shut against the onslaught as pleasure crashed back through my core to every part of my body.

I writhed against him, clinging to his hair with both hands as I let myself whimper in pleasure.

When Cazien slid two fingers inside of me, I couldn't even whimper.

He pulled back, his fingers continuing to stroke. He teased that sensitive spot, never for long enough to send me over the edge that was so damn close I wanted to demand his mouth return to what it was doing.

"You taste so damn good. So wet and perfect for me." His voice was low, but I was so focused on him, he could have whispered, and I'd have heard him over the thunder. His words wrapped around the rope of my climax, pulling it closer and closer to me with every syllable. "Gods, I wish it was my cock in you right now."

I let out a sob, the rough sound scratching my throat. His lips wrapped around my bundle of nerves, and I wrapped my legs around his shoulders, desperate to get closer.

His free hand released my leg and snaked upwards until he covered my mouth. Then he curled his fingers like he had that night, and I was glad of his hand as it muffled the half shout and moan that came from me as pleasure warped my body, tossing me through merciless waves.

Cazien eased my legs apart, and crawled back up my body, pressing gentle kisses against my skin until he was kissing me.

I could taste myself on his lips, and I had the sudden urge to discover what he tasted like. But I was trapped under him, his kisses muddling my senses, unable to think or do anything other than return them. And then, impossibly, he began to stroke me again. His movements were slow, as languid as his kisses.

"I don't know if I can," I whispered into his kiss.

He pressed kisses along my jaw before whispering into my ear. "You can do anything."

Dammit, my heart twisted at that, ripping enough to create a spot for him. He was hurtling me towards more than lust, with every new part of him he revealed.

His pace didn't increase as he kissed me again. His fingers were slow but relentless. When I climaxed, it took me by surprise. He kissed me through it, swallowing down my gasps and quiet moan.

Cazien slipped his fingers from me, holding me by the waist as if afraid to let me go, and rested his forehead against mine. That close, I could barely make out the details of his face as he looked at me.

"How is it that you do this to me, Minerva?"

He kissed me again, not letting me answer. Then he moved, lying on his side next to me and tucking my back against his front. I could feel his hard length against me but all he did was pull one of the other blankets up over us. I fell asleep with his lips against my head and his arm around my waist.

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



The rain had slowed to a drizzle, and the morning sun warmed the air until we drowned in the humidity. But it was impossible to be annoyed—much anyways. Even the men picked up on Cazien's new determination. So much so, that once we finally waved farewell to Sanaty and Tessopia, Durnth made his way up to where I walked, Cian's reins in my hands.

Cazien marched father ahead, like he physically could not go any slower and if were able to, he'd mount Nixus and gallop the entire way there.

"You know something." Durnth spoke quietly, but there was an implied demand in every word. I nodded slowly, and made enough of a show looking at Cazien to put my boss at ease.

I kept my eyes on the path ahead. "The elder's family passed down a legend—nothing more than a few snippets. But when they retired, Cazien pulled out the map. We know the entrance now."

Durnth stiffened beside me, and I risked a glance at him. He had a look I knew too well. I nudged him with my elbow.

"There's more," I whispered, adding nothing else. I needed to reel him in. We made it a few more strides before he growled at me.

"Well?"

Again, I made a show of looking ahead, but this time I looked behind us too.

"Cazien doesn't want the treasure," I began and Durnth laughed. I laughed quickly, as Cazien looked back at us. I smiled, dropping my face a bit as I met his eyes.

We'd woken up tangled in each other at dawn. We'd traded kisses, nothing more, until we heard our hosts rising for the day.

His hard gaze softened and he turned back to the path.

"You're not an idiot, girl."

I glared at Durnth. "Exactly. So when I tell you he"—I pointed at Cazien—"doesn't care about the treasure, you should bloody well believe me."

Durnth walked beside me, quiet. I tugged my cloak's hood farther down over my head. It made the heat worse, but it kept me dry.

"Why's he doing it then?"

I'd been debating on what to tell Durnth. I couldn't tell him about Cazien's brother. That felt more like a betrayal than the idea of killing him. The best lies were always told with truth.

"There's a woman"—I ignored his snort—"said she'd marry him if he found the relic of the Crimson Dragon. I've never heard of it, but she gave him the map. If he brings it to her, she becomes his wife and he gets a greater title than his brother."

Durnth rubbed his chin. “It’s always about a woman. Is that why he’s not in your bed?”

I blushed furiously, and he laughed, his arm around my shoulder. “Don’t feel bad, Min. Prospero knows you’re picky as hell when it comes to your men, and if that man has set his heart on a lass, there’ll be no deterring him. Stick close with him until it’s time.”

I frowned. “For what? There’s literally no need for your plan on the boat, Durnth. He doesn’t care about the treasure.”

He shook his head.

“Min, you weren’t born to the same dark world as men like him and me. I doubt you’d understand even if I tried to explain it. He may think he don’t care, but when he sees it, he will.” He narrowed his eyes, then his hard face softened with pity. “Don’t go getting your heart involved in this, Minerva. It never ends well. Especially if he’s got a bride waiting for him. Men will go to the end of the world for the ones they love and if he’s on this harebrained quest, then it’s love all right. Even if we abandon the plan, you’re never seeing him again. Harden your heart, or the world will crush it.”

I swallowed, but nodded, and Durnth melted back into the line of men behind me. Durnth had thought my reluctance was because I was falling for Cazien, and not because of the lies I was spinning.

But had he seen something I wasn’t letting myself?

That morning, moments within waking up, I’d been happy—truly happy. There had been no nightmares, no restless sleep, and I woke up feeling safe. Safe and... cared

for—cherished even. Cazien's face had been soft in sleep, the glower so often on his face smoothed away. I could wake up to him every morning and not grow used to the moment his eyes opened and his gaze focused on me.

I swore quietly. Cian's ears flicking towards me, and I patted the mare's neck.

"Dammit, Cian, what am I going to do?" I whispered to her. "I've gone and fallen in love with him, haven't I?"

She snorted, and I sighed, patting her again.

Durnth was right. If love was involved, someone would go to the ends of the earth for them. Wasn't that what I was trying to do? To somehow protect Cazien from Durnth's schemes, while still helping Cazien retrieve the only hope of rescuing his brother? Wasn't love the reason why the idea of betraying Cazien sickened me? Tears burned at my eyes—I'd rather he kill me when he found out, than let me live and know he hated me.

I had choices to make, and every single one ended with me losing Cazien. But there was one that would let him survive Durnth's mutiny.

I increased my pace and Cazien heard my approach, guiding Nixus to the side of the trail so I could walk next to him, with Cian on the other side.

"What'd Durnth want?"

"A reminder that I'm expected to get us to the treasure," I grumbled. It was the truth at least.

"You still think he had something to do with the first night?"

I did. I shook my head. "I don't know, now. He knows he needs us to find the treasure, and he's only seen the map in

the ship, right?"

"He's inquired about it since." Cazien didn't sound happy about that. I nodded, letting the silence build between us. It wasn't stagnant, though. And while the memory of his face buried between my legs, his tongue exploring my most intimate of places, made my face heat, I wasn't embarrassed.

I needed to be honest with myself, even if I couldn't be honest with him yet. I swore to Prospero I would be soon, though.

"Can I see the map—the current one, I mean?"

He reached into a bag on his saddle and pulled the waxed parchment out. At least the maps my father had created were all treated to be waterproof. We didn't dare take out Xanu's map, for fear of the rain ruining it.

I unfolded the map enough to see our current position and the surrounding area and searched along the mountain ridges lined in thick black ink.

"We should head this way." I tilted the map so he could see. "It's a different route but won't add more than a day to the trip."

Cazien leaned over my shoulder. Even with the breeze I could smell the warm spice clinging to him. I wanted to bury my face in his neck and breathe him in.

"Why?" He didn't sound accusatory, or even skeptical. He was asking to understand, but not doubting my ability to do the job he paid me for. Not even Durnth had ever given me that respect.

"Honestly?" I chewed on my lips before meeting his gaze shyly. "I want to show you something. It was a favorite place

of mine when we'd travel the area."

He smiled, a real one, and it transformed him from ruthless warrior to a devastating man.

"I think we can spare one day," he answered. "If you think it's worth it."

The spot could save your life, I thought. It was definitely worth it.

We made camp that evening at the trail split and Cazien took the first watch. It gave me the opportunity to go to Durnth and set my plan in motion. It had to work.

"I'm changing our route." I made sure my voice was quiet as I helped him brush down the ponies. "We're heading to the limestone canyons, but the new route will add a day."

"Why?" He grunted the word as he poured feed in front of the pony.

"Because if we're going to take him out, it needs to be soon. Before he can suspect anything and before he sends word to his brother again."

"That damned bird will be a problem," he mused. "I've been thinking how to use it to send word to the men to take the ship."

I had been too, but to warn Gavret. There wasn't a way, though, without tipping off Cazien or Durnth.

"The eagle will be here in two days. Tomorrow we'll get to a location that I can distract Cazien." We both moved to the next pony, not drawing attention to ourselves. "I'm going to get him separated from the rest of you." I kept my eyes on the pony in front of me. We didn't have many to

tend to, not after leaving more than half with Sanaty to return to Grotto. "Are you carrying any sleep root?"

He nodded once, not looking at me.

"I need it. I'll take him. Make some believable excuse about him taking his bride there. Then drug him. The map stays with him, so I'll bring it when he's out. Then go back and finish the job."

"Why not kill him before you bring it?"

It was time to tell him some of the truth. Even if it took me a bit. "You were right." I couldn't look at him. "I let myself get caught up with him. So I'll need to get you the map before I try to kill him in case I can't before he wakes up."

"You know you can't win a fight with him."

I snorted. "Careful, Durnth. You sound like you care about me. You'll have the map with the location. Backtrack down the trail we take until you're here again and stick to it. Capture the damn bird however you have to and send whatever you need to. I'm guessing you've made some sort of code for the men to know?"

He nodded. "Thad's in charge of reading the messages."

Thad was an expert lockpick and thief. His inclusion in the men should have told me Durnth had planned something like this all along. He knew how wealthy the Talon family was, and if Cazien was hiring, it'd be worth more than they were being paid.

I finished with the horse. "Do what you need to. Get me that sleep root and wine. I'll get you the map and then I'll either make it back to you, or I'll be dead and you'll have a pissed-off Talon on your tail."

"Make sure that doesn't happen."

I shrugged. "He's not familiar with the area and you'll have a head start and his horse. You haven't made it this long as the Hallows' leader for no reason."

Appealing to his ego had the reaction I'd hoped.

"Get it done, Minerva," he said gruffly. "He ain't worth your life and I got more work for you."

I didn't bother replying as I finished brushing down the pony. I went through the rest of them before moving to the tent. I was off watch duty tonight, and tomorrow night it wouldn't matter. I'd get Durnth the map, but without the secret of the tunnels, Cazien and I had an advantage. And if Cazien killed me, like he had the woman he loved, then I'd make sure he knew which way to go.

When he finally joined me in the tent, I had a small trail lamp lit and the current map laid out over his bedroll.

He eased down beside me on my own bedroll, pulling off his sword belt to lay it next to him. "What are you looking at?"

Cazien leaned against me, braced on an arm behind me, his face practically over my shoulder. A day was all I had left with him. I turned my head, pressing a kiss against his lips. I'd surprised him, but he didn't let me pull away. When we did part, he had a half grin on his face, his blue eyes reflecting the lamp light's single flame.

"What was that for?"

I shrugged and looked back at the map. "I wanted to. This is where we are now, and this is the desolation."

That time he did rest his chin on my shoulder, his loose hair teasing my neck.

"This route looks shorter." He pointed to a trail marked closer around the mountain's base.

"It'd cut the time in half," I agreed. "If we survived."

"Kanoi?"

"Precisely."

"They're that much of a threat?"

I considered the question, and what my plan might force him to do. I swallowed and measured my words. "If it was one or two people, you might be able to get through without being noticed. It'd take longer but could still be faster than the long route. Or you'd be easily killed by a tribe. A group as large as ours would be noticed and, even with the bribes, they could kill us all and take everything we have regardless."

"So, the long way." He brushed my hair back over my ear and shoulder before kissing my neck. I raised an eyebrow at him. Both times we'd been intimate, there'd been more than a piece of canvas separating us and the rest of the men. "What? I wanted to."

I rolled my eyes and leaned away when he tried again. His eyebrows lowered, head tilted in concern, and I kissed him, reveling in the freedom my decision had given me. Before it could grow too intense, I pulled back and pressed my fingers against his lips.

"Be patient," I told him, and he nipped my fingertip. The slight pain sent goosebumps all over and the heat went straight to my core.

"And if I don't want to be?" He crowded closer, speaking against my fingers.

I giggled. I actually giggled, like a damn court lady in love. It spurred him on, crawling over me until I had to lie back or be toppled, a wolfish grin on his face.

He nuzzled my throat, torturing me with kisses.

“Cazien,” I groaned, keeping my voice low. I pushed against his shoulders and he stopped with a dramatic sigh.

“You’re a cruel temptress,” he accused me, amusement in his voice. I rolled my eyes, holding back another giggle but not my smile.

He settled against me, half on the map, half on my bedroll, his finger trailed along my cheek near my lips. “You don’t smile enough.”

“Oh?”

He met my eyes and my heart twisted again, opening for him that much more. “You’re gorgeous when you smile.” He frowned. “On second thought, I forbid you from smiling around anyone else. They’d try to steal you away from me and I am a very selfish man.”

I let my own fingers wander the lines of him, taking every moment between us and memorizing it. It gave me the strength to do what I needed to. To be bold in that moment.

“Tomorrow, what I wanted to show you, we’ll be close by late afternoon. We’ll have to leave the horses, since the trail is steep.”

He curled a finger under my chin, tilting me to look at him. “And what is this special place?”

I smiled, small and secretive, and kissed him. I kept kissing him, along his jaw in imitation of him the previous night. When I reached his ear, I tugged it between my lips.

“Somewhere no one else will be able to hear us.”

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



“D amn.”

I smiled at the awe in Cazien’s voice, irrationally pleased that he reacted so viscerally. I shifted the pack’s weight, grinning at him.

“It’s probably my favorite place on the island.”

It was a place of happy memories, and if I had to die somewhere, I’d want it to be here. I wouldn’t think about that yet. I had a few more hours with Cazien, and the way he looked at me, before all that disappeared.

In front of us was a series of heated pools that climbed up the side of the mountain, the lowest one extending actually into the mountain through a cave. The waters were clear, silver fish darting towards the interior of the cave.

“How are there not a hundred people here? Are the people of Grotto really that afraid of going beyond the wall?”

He followed me as I crossed the porous rock to the softer sand-like area that led into the cave alongside the pool of water.

"I think those that wouldn't be afraid are too busy with working to survive to be able to venture here. And the nobles or wealthy are too afraid of the so-called heathens of Aeaea."

I dropped my pack on the sand, the sunlight reflecting off the neck of a dark wine bottle. It wasn't the drugged one, that one was towards the bottom, wrapped in a blanket. A subtle mark on the corks ensured I wouldn't drink the wrong one by mistake.

Cazien crouched at the pool's edge, running his hand through the water.

"It's cool," he said with surprise and looked up at the pools cascading into one another above. There was steam rising off them, the air hazy above the entire side of the mountain.

"It is," I nodded. "It's the only one that isn't so hot, but it's still not as cold as regular mountain springs."

I pulled out the two thick blankets and moved into the shade of the cave and laid them out on the pebbled ground. The rocks were smoothed down, the biggest ones no larger than my thumbnail, and with a blanket wouldn't be uncomfortable like the rock platform outside.

I sat and yanked off my boots, then the rest of my clothes before I lost my nerve. I felt Cazien's stare as I walked into the water, the pool lined with the same pebbles. When the water was up to my waist, I sank under.

For that moment, there was nothing except the sound of water in my ears, its cool embrace cradling me as it pulled the day's travel off of me. I tugged my hair free of its tie, letting it fan out around me in dark gold strands.

Cazien entered the pool, his movements echoing through the water and I moved deeper into the pool. When I broke the surface, the water reached the tops of my breasts and Cazien was hip deep, his clothes piled haphazardly on the blanket next to mine. His own hair was only half up in the bun I'd come to find irritatingly attractive.

His eyes, a darker blue than the water around us, honed in on me. He was a hunter, and I was his prey. And that look, the way he moved through the water with such ease, made my entire body crave him.

But what was a hunter without a bit of a chase?

I winked at him and threw myself into the water, swimming deeper into the cave. His dark laugh echoed off of the walls, and I swam faster. He'd catch me, but there was something I wanted him to see first. Besides that, being pursued by him made me want to be caught.

My memory was right, but as I turned the corner into a secluded offshoot of the cave, strong fingers wrapped around my ankle and pulled me backwards.

I slipped under the water as Cazien's other hand gripped my thigh. But I twisted, escaping his grip, and pushed away from him. When I surfaced a few feet away, the light from the entrance of the cave lit him enough to see the smoky look on his face. It was a promise and a statement—he would catch me, and he'd let me escape him that time.

"Come here, there's one last thing I want to show you." I crooked my finger at him, beckoning him to follow me around the corner. He swam forward, the pool deep enough that even he couldn't stand.

I pressed my back against the rock wall, holding it so I didn't need to tread water. He trapped me against there, his hands gripping the stone above my head but didn't touch me otherwise.

It should have been pitch-black, the sun completely unable to reach this pocket. Instead, there was a faint glow of different colors, as if we were in a prism.

"I've seen these before." Cazien was quiet, but his voice filled the area. "When I was in Valencia. But they were in the ocean, and only shone blue."

"We call them Agni's Blood," I whispered. "If we stay here past sunset, the entire cave will glow. It's beautiful. I still dream about it from when I first saw it as a little girl."

Cazien bent his head and licked a water drop from my cheek, and set me alight.

I let go of the wall, sinking into the water, and kicked off the rocks, shouldering Cazien's waist and knocking free of his embrace. I swam back towards the entrance, knowing I'd only given myself a second or two of a head start.

He crashed into me from behind, wrapping his arms around me and hauling me back against him, his mouth finding my ear.

"I'm not that easy to get rid of, darling."

I twisted in his arms to face him. "Oh, really?" I purred.

I heaved myself up and against him, using my entire weight to push him under the water. Instead of swimming away when he let go of me, I dove deeper towards the bottom of the pool, swimming along the pebbles.

I came up behind him, silent, his body outlined by the sunlight. He was warily watching the water and I only

surfaced high enough to breathe through my nose. With the smallest movements, I inched towards him.

Then I dunked him again.

He didn't let go of me this time, wrapping his arms around me as we sank deeper. We wrestled in the water, and exhilaration electrified my senses.

He shoved off the bottom of the pool, breaking the surface and hauling me up against him, our legs treading the water, weaving between the other's.

I kissed him, or maybe he kissed me. I clung to him, but had no plan of submerging again. He moved us until he stood and I wrapped my legs around his waist.

I groaned as his hard length was trapped between us. He shuddered against me, his hands going to my ass, and angled his hips until his hardness stroked against my core.

Cazien lifted me higher and higher, hooking my knees over his elbows, and I wobbled as I tried not to fall backwards into the water.

"What—"

"You said no one can hear us." The predatory look had returned to his gaze, my own need flaring in response. "I didn't get to hear you near enough the other night. Can you float on your back?"

At my tentative nod, his hands went back to cupping my bottom—bracing me I realized.

I trusted him, I wanted him. Gods above and below, I think I even loved him.

I stretched back, using him as an anchor as I arched, my arms splayed out as I floated.

Cazien held me, his hands moving to my waist as his mouth descended onto me. The cool water lapped against me as I shuddered under his tongue, contrasting with the heat building inside me. I gave myself over to him, letting every sound I held back the other night echo off of the cave's ceiling.

His grip never faltered and the most ancient parts of my heart knew that I was safe with him, that he wouldn't let me drown in anything other than pleasure.

The overwhelming sense of security and trust between us in that moment catapulted me over the edge. I bent upwards, my head falling back as my climax took over me.

Cazien lowered me, his hands never leaving me until he cradled me against his chest, my ankles hooked behind his lower back.

"You're magnificent, Minerva," he spoke against my lips between the soft kisses which drove me mad.

"I want you, Cazien." I didn't care if I sounded breathless—he made me breathless. He made me a desperate, needy creature and only he could give me what I craved more than air.

"Then you'll have me."

He carried me out of the pool, our kisses harder, deeper, as if we tried to climb into one another, to consume every part of us. He sank to his knees on the blankets I'd laid out, lowering me down with such control that I wanted him to snap—to let me experience every bit of the man he was, darkness and all.

"Cazien," I sighed his name and touched every inch I could reach while he kissed my neck.

"I like it when you say my name." His mouth moved lower, reaching my breasts and teasing a moan from me. "I like making you sound like this," he spoke against my peaked nipple.

I gasped as his fingers dragged through me from the sensitive bundle of nerves that had me twitching to my entrance, which made me gasp. He kissed me, slipping one then two fingers within me.

I could do nothing but hold on to him as his lips moved across me and his fingers stroked within me. His arousal lay heavy against my stomach and I reached for it, unable to withstand being the only one being unmade.

His lips pulled away from my collarbone, and he grunted a curse as my fingers wrapped around him. We were both covered in water from the pool but his skin was a furnace under my fingers.

I stroked his length, squeezing like he'd shown me. He retaliated by curling his fingers, pressing against the spot that had me shattering before. I arched against him, my breasts pushing into his chest, and I buried my fingers in his hair, pulling him back to kiss him furiously. I was so close.

"Cazien." I didn't recognize the husky voice that came from me. "Now. Please."

His fingers stilled as he held my gaze. He slid them from me and my sex ached at the loss.

He rose up above me, my foot hooked over the back of his knee, my other thigh pressed against his hip. "Once we do this, you can't go back."

I sucked in my lower lip, but nodded. “I want it to be you, Cazien.”

His entire body rippled with restrained need and he let out a long breath. He rested his forehead against mine, one hand cupping my cheek, his thumb rubbing my skin.

“The pain will be quick, and I swear I’ll make it up to you.”

I raised my chin, pressing a quick kiss to his lips before meeting the storm-blue gaze of his. “I trust you, Cazien Talon.”

His eyes widened, something shifting behind them, and I moved my hands to his ribs. He lined himself up against me, stroking himself through my folds and coating himself with my desire.

His eyes never left mine as he began to ease inside of me.

I struggled to keep my eyes open against the feeling of being filled by this man. I could feel him quaking with need and yet he took care to ease into me, taking in my every reaction. He paused, coming to my barrier. I already felt so full, it seemed impossible I could take him farther into me.

He lowered his lips to mine, kissing me—holding still over me, even though his own body must be demanding to sheath himself in me. I was ready, I wanted him, wanted this—and I tried to say all of that in my kiss.

He must have felt it, his hand moving from my face to cup the back of my head, his other hand going to the outside of my thigh. Cazien pressed forward, taking my virginity, and taking my pain into him with his kisses.

He was thick, stretching me beyond what his fingers had, reaching deeper into me than I thought was possible. He stilled, waiting there for me to grow used to him.

I shifted under him and he pulled back to watch me.

“All right, darling?”

With those three words I knew my heart was his, not just my body. Tears burned my eyes and his widened as he tried to pull out but I wrapped myself around him, laughing. “I’m all right. Perfect even,” I told him with a watery laugh. I leaned up to kiss him, to reassure him in a way he’d accept. “I realized I’m happy.”

He gave his own short, weak laugh, angling his hips forward, and I moaned.

“I could do this forever, darling,” he said. “You’re amazing, and you feel amazing, and I—” He cut himself off. Before I could demand to know what he was about to say, he gave me a salacious wolf-like grin. “And I promised I’d make up for the pain.”

He moved, drawing out slowly before easing back in. Each time he pushed into me, he stole my breath. His mouth found mine, and he clutched me to him, my thigh hiked high against his hip. Cazien still held back. I could feel it in the muscles of his back as I ran my hands up his spine and into his hair.

I pulled tight, remembering how he liked it, and broke our kisses. His hips never slowed.

“Let go, Cazien,” I growled, gripping his hair tighter. His eyes were nearly black, the storm-blue nothing but a thin circle of color. “I want you, Cazien. All of you. I’m yours, Caz.”

My words broke something in both of us and the next snap of his hips was harsher, more indicative of the strength buried in him.

I relished it.

My world narrowed to him, to the press of his hips, to his teeth grazing my shoulders. To his fingers twisting and teasing my nipples. To his muscles bunching under my grip, to the scars lining his skin, to the soft, damp strands of his hair. To the breath we shared as we raced together towards pleasure.

His hand slipped between us, his thumb pressing circles against the top of my core and I seized. Every muscle taut, almost in pain as even my moans were silenced as he pushed me along the knife's edge. Another swipe of his thumb set off the explosion within me.

I cried out, so loud my voice broke, as wave after wave of pleasure thrashed through my veins. It was unrelenting and unending as Cazien kept stroking me, burying himself in me over and over, his breath ragged above me. He brought me back to the knife edge, and I shook my head—unable to accept that it could happen again so soon.

“You’re mine, Minerva.” His words were broken. Another hard thrust. “Say it.”

“I’m yours,” I gasped out. It was true. I was his. I was his and he was mine.

I shattered again, my core gripping down on him. I reached for him, curling up towards him until our lips brushed as we panted.

“I’m yours,” I said, gripping his hair. I growled, meeting his staggering thrusts. “And you’re mine.”

I growled it over, and over. Claiming Cazien as mine. His control snapped, and he slammed into me over and over and I never stopped my claiming.

His own pleasure erupted with a crazed snarl as he pinned me back against the ground. His kiss was harsh and frantic and I met him bite for bite as he spilled inside of me, taking every single part he'd give.

When he collapsed against me, bracing most of his weight on his arms, I wrapped my own around him. I buried my face against his hair, breathing him in, memorizing this moment. Tears pricked my eyes, slipping from my cheeks into his damp hair. Because if I opened my eyes, the pack with the drugged wine would be within sight, waiting for my betrayal.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



**I**'d put it off long enough. I was curled over Cazien, my thigh over his hips—his rough fingers drawing idle designs over my skin. We pressed against each other, despite the heat of the Aeaea jungle. We hadn't spoken much, the sounds of the world muted as we focused on one another.

"What are you going to do first after getting your brother free?" I traced the lines of his pectoral, down his sternum and over a small scar. I couldn't get enough of him, and I needed to remember why I was doing this.

Cazien hummed, the sound deep and rumbley under my ear. His hand paused where it had been lazily stroking my breast. Not to entice, but to touch. To enjoy.

"I could give you a real answer, like probably sleep because I'll be exhausted." His amusement was plain and I poked him in the belly. He grabbed the offending finger and brought it to his mouth to nip. "I imagine, though, when all is settled, the first thing I'll do is visit our mother's grave."

"Not your father's?"

"My father was not a kind man, darling." He pressed a kiss to my finger before releasing me. My hand went to his heart, the beat strong and sure under me. "But my mother, yes. She hadn't passed yet, when Viridian had been taken. So I'd want to make sure she knew I'd fulfilled our promise. That we'd get him back."

Iron resolve rushed through my limbs, waiting for the blacksmith's hammer to shape it for a purpose. I sat up on an elbow, holding his face, and meeting his gaze. "You will save your brother, Cazien. No matter what else happens on this damn island, you'll save Viridian."

That meant I needed to keep him alive and away from Durnth.

I rose before he could tug me down and distract me with intoxicating kisses, and retrieved the bottles. My heart skipped as I looked at the hash mark on the cork. Durnth better not have messed this up. I hesitated, shivering as a breeze pushed the cool air above the pool around me. I looked at his belt, his sword within easy reach of him.

Would he strike before I could explain everything? I thought of the scar on his hip. At least he wouldn't bear a physical reminder of my betrayal. If he killed me now, he'd storm down to the camp, and Durnth's not an idiot. He'd be prepared for it. I'd seen the crossbows some men had. Cazien wouldn't survive.

I popped the cork on the bottles, noting which one was drugged, and plastered a smile on my face before turning back. Cazien's heated look, even as he reached for a bottle, made bile sear my heart. I settled beside him, forcing a few sips of wine down.

He reached for me. “Why are you so far away?” he asked before taking a long pull of the wine.

I took another sip. How long would it take for the drugs to kick in?

Cazien sat up and snagged one of my hands, his wine bottle in the other. “I know you want to head across the Great Sea when this is over. Maybe I can convince you to come see the Talon Estate on your way. I think you’d like it. Morgan would love you.” He took another swig of wine, as if embarrassed.

Something cracked in my ribs, tears constricting my throat. “I’d like that,” I croaked out.

Cazien began to smile—his real smile—before he blinked and looked at his bottle. He looked back up at me and the tears moved to my eyes as the confusion turned to pain in his eyes. “What—”

I dropped my bottle, lunging for him as he slumped backwards, helping lower him down to his back. His arms jerked, but the drugs were powerful. Black started to replace the whites of his eyes, an anger like I’d never seen filling his gaze.

“I had to,” I whispered, hunching over him, tears falling onto his bare chest. “I had to.”

His eyes closed, his body lax under me, knocked out by the powerful sleeping drug.

Every part of me was raw. As if I’d been left to roast under the Aeaea sun, to burn my skin away, and then be thrown to the cruel depths of the sea, the salt attacking every single nerve.

My time with Cazien was done, my death sealed. But he would live. He would be able to save Viridian.

I sucked in a breath, and then another. I forced the pain rupturing my heart down until I could ignore it. It refused though.

I was back to who I was over ten years ago. A weak girl, sobbing with heartache, as the ones she loved were taken from her. Except I was the bad guy this time. No one had taken Cazien from me. I'd done it to myself.

Gritting my teeth, I hauled myself back together. The pain darkened my vision, but I pushed through it. I would endure it if it meant saving him.

I pulled on my clothes, every move mechanical. If I let the pain overwhelm me again, I'd stop and condemn us both. Next, I went to his doublet, and as it always was, King Xanu's map was there. Unfolding it, I found the pen in my pack. A look at Cazien's prone body told me he still breathed. That was my other worry—that Durnth wouldn't trust me to kill Cazien and had used more than the sleeping root in the wine.

I had to write lightly, as I circled a different location in the limestone canyons, writing Sanaty's name above it. Blowing, I hoped the mark would fool Durnth into believing we'd marked it days ago. I felt for the near invisible slip and removed the paper there with the clue. I set it aside and began the second hardest part of my plan.

The rope had been buried at the bottom of my pack. I kept my eyes down as I rolled Cazien carefully, tugging his wrists behind his back and tying them together. I did the same to his ankles, and above his thighs.

His blades and clothing were out of reach. He'd be able to crawl to them if I wasn't back by the time he woke up. I dumped out both wine bottles and set them next to his pack. He'd need them to carry water for the rest of his journey.

With a last, shaking kiss to Cazien's forehead, I made my way out of the cave.

It took the entire hike down to school my expression into something more like the Minerva the Hallows knew me as. I wasn't the woman this island made me feel like. Aeaea had happy memories, but I'd been too soft. I'd been ripped from gentleness and thrown to the brambles.

I pulled those thorns of survival deeper into my skin. They'd kept me alive for the last ten years. They'd keep me alive for the next hour while I convinced Durnth of my success.

Making enough noise for the men to hear me, I stomped the last few paces to the camp. When I came into view, I knew I'd made the right decision. Durnth held a crossbow up, the other ten men armed to the teeth. If I'd been Cazien, I'd have six inches of crossbow bolt in my chest.

I raised my hands, the folded map in hand. "Easy, Durnth. I took care of him."

"How?" A man—not a Hallows—demanded, not lowering his sword. "We saw him fighting."

I rolled my eyes dramatically and put a sway in my step as I crossed the rest of the way. I held out the map and Durnth took it. "Because, despite having a woman he's trying to impress, Cazien is still a man. I couldn't take him in a fair fight. But with his cock in me?" I hoped my laugh

didn't sound as forced as it was. The others laughed, and even Durnth grinned.

He clapped me on the shoulder. "I knew you had it in you, Min."

I nodded to the map. "It's got everything. The elder's story confirmed the location. I need to clean up the mess up there—don't want to risk pissing off Agni." I looked in the direction of the volcano and shuddered for effect. "I'll catch up."

"Think you can get his damned horse to come with us?" Durnth looked to Nixus, who pawed the ground. "Near about took my hand off when I approached."

I scrunched my face. "Cian likes me. Maybe they'll follow."

He nodded once. "Good. It'd be a damned shame to have to kill the horse."

I couldn't let Nixus be killed. "I'll handle it. What are your plans for the bird?"

"We've got a net, one of the sailors knows how to use nets to catch birds for fresh meat on ships. We'll manage."

You learn fast enough on the streets that you can't worry about everyone doing their job. You either trust them to do their part or you don't work with them at all.

"I'd head out," I told Durnth as I headed to the tent I'd shared. "The scent is going to attract beasts and you don't want to know what some of them look like."

"And you?"

I smirked at Durnth. "Aww, you do care." I opened the flap. "I'll be fine. I'll meet up with you by noon tomorrow."

He held his hand out to me and I clasped his forearm. "To our fortunes," he said and released me.

I packed everything up, the sounds of the rest of camp being broken down swiftly made it through the canvas.

Was Cazien still out? Was he still even alive? I hurried, tying the bedrolls and tossing them out of the tent. I only needed enough for one person, and Cazien's gear was arguably better. It'd make sense to Durnth for me to pick his gear over mine.

Breaking down the tent was more difficult since I usually had Cazien's help. But I wrestled it down into tightly folded canvas wrapped around the lightweight metal support rods.

If only wrestling my emotions was as easy. Before this trip, before him, I could have done it. I could have gotten close to someone, awkwardly flirted, then killed them when necessary.

But then a damned dark blue-eyed man, too attractive for his own good with a confidence fueled by bloodshed showed up and called me darling.

I tightened the tent to my pack harsher than necessary.

Pulling it on, I gave one last look to Durnth. If he suspected my treachery, he didn't offer any signs.

"I'll catch up by noon tomorrow," I reminded him, then turned back towards Cazien.

The hike to the pools had been steep, but now I might as well have been climbing up a wall of sand. I fell to my knees, scratching my palm against a harsh rock, and I let the tears come. I didn't even care if Durnth had me followed at that moment—what would they tell him? Poor girl fell and cried? Screw them all.

I wiped my face and nose with my forearm and forced myself up once more. Every step, my heart weighed heavier. The warmth I'd had with him was gone, replaced by sharp ice that would never thaw. My feet sank into the ground, the mountain trying to swallow me up and I wanted to let it.

I didn't want to confront Cazien and tell him everything of my betrayal. But he needed to know and needed to know the safest way for him to travel was alone.

I forced myself to keep going. I was already dead; I was just still breathing.

He hadn't moved since I'd left him, and I dropped my pack beside him. Assuring myself that he was still alive, I began tidying the area. I folded his clothes neatly, setting the weapons beside them. I removed my own blades and bandolier, contributing them to the pile. Then I found the map my father had made and carefully sketched out a route.

Cazien would have to go through Kanoi territory, but by himself, his chance of being noticed was small.

My back ached from hunching over where I sat cross-legged, making notes of anything about Aeaea I could remember. Especially things to be concerned about, or areas to avoid. These pools weren't the only ones around the mountain—but they were the only safe ones.

I raised my head as Cazien moved. Shifted, more like. I was nauseated but my body wouldn't move, not even to let me empty my stomach. My vision blurred and I cursed the hot tears that slipped down my cheeks. I dashed them away and composed myself.

Setting the map closer to him, I waited for the drug to wear off.

The sun had disappeared behind the mountain by the time Cazien heaved himself upright. I hadn't unbound him yet; there were things I needed to tell him before he... killed me.

His eyes were filled with black, a snarl on his face, and my heart stopped. He strained against the bindings and there was a moment that I worried they wouldn't hold.

I stayed seated and raised my hands, beseechingly.

"What did you do?" He didn't sound like Cazien. He sounded—he sounded like a demon. For the first time since we'd met, I was truly afraid of the man in front of me.

"I'll tell you everything, Cazien."

I didn't know if it was the honesty in my voice, my submissive position, or something else that had the black retreating from his eyes. When he shook his head, the last of the strangeness around him left. "What was that?" I never felt so timid.

"You do not get to ask questions."

I swallowed, looking down at the smooth pebbles between us.

"On the boat, after you revealed what you were looking for, Durnth decided we'd take the treasure for ourselves," I began. I told him how Durnth had ordered me to get close to Cazien, but how I'd refused to whore myself for the man. I told him about Durnth's threats and how I was dead either way. So, I did what I felt I had to.

Cazien was quiet.

The sky began to darken, night sweeping in from the horizon. Soon the plants lining the cave's ceiling would begin to glow. Perhaps he'd let me look at them as he plunged the blade into my heart or across my throat.

I nudged the map forward. "I altered the mark on your map and removed the slip of paper with Xanu's message. He doesn't know about the legend Sanaty told us, or how to see the hidden map. I drew out a route for you and if you follow it, you'll get there a few days before him."

I dared to look at him, my heart constricting as he glared at the map my fingers brushed against. His eyes snapped to mine, and I knew it was time. I rose, slow enough he tracked my every move, and slid out the only dagger I'd kept.

He sat there, watching me like a predator, waiting to see if I'd release him and if he would need to lash out. I didn't meet his eyes, staring at the rope bound around his ankles as I sawed through the knot.

Cazien could kick me. I doubted he'd even need me to release his hands for him to kill me. I'd rather not die with his foot on my neck, but I guessed it wasn't up to me.

He stayed still, coiled like a snake, as I cut the knot at his thighs. Cazien didn't watch as I moved around behind him to his wrists.

I hesitated, drawing out the moment where all I could see was his strong, scarred back, his thick muscular arms, his tousled dark hair. I inhaled him, warm spice and sage, the lingering scent of leather oil and mineral water from the pool. And maybe, even, a hint of me.

I slid the point of the dagger under the knot, and then whispered, "I didn't tell him about the relic or about your brother." I ripped the blade up through the knot and backed away.

Cazien rose, power lining every part of him, as he turned towards me. It might have made me a coward, but I couldn't look at his face.

I tossed the knife towards him, flinching as the blade hit the rocks with a quiet clatter.

"It was the only way I could keep you alive."

I hadn't planned on telling him that, and despite everything, I doubted it'd matter.

Heavy steps preceded him, and my eyes fell closed despite my hope to look at the Agni's Blood as I died.

A large hand, maybe even the one he'd brought me pleasure with, wrapped around my throat, his finger and thumb rammed up against my jaw. His other hand went to the back of my head, fisting my hair until I cried out, and forced me to look at him.

Dammit, even in this fury, his beauty made me ache with want.

Cazien brought his face inches away from mine. A few hours earlier in the day, the same move led to consuming kisses. I wasn't stupid enough to hope for the same.

"You will do the fucking job I'm paying you for," he bit out, every word a stab of ice through my chest. "Then when I've got what I've come for, I never want to see your face again."

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



**H**e released me and I staggered back, my heart a bucking horse in my chest, unable to comprehend the moment.

My hands went to my throat, but while I was able to soothe the physical pain of his hold, I could do nothing for the agony clawing its way through me.

Cazien went to his clothes, his back turned to me in complete dismissal. He was dressed in moments, buckling on his sword belt and sliding the other blades I'd retrieved into their places.

I'd expected to be dead by now, and now that I wasn't... I didn't really know what to do.

Going to my own pile of weapons, I crouched in front of them. The moment my hand gripped my bandolier, Cazien's foot came down on my hand. It hadn't hurt, but I couldn't pull away.

His face was devoid of emotion as I looked up.

"Guides have no reason to be armed."

My brows snapped together. "You can't be serious."

His foot didn't move and I scoffed, disgust at both of us gripping me. I yanked my hand back and he let me go, swooping down to collect my blades himself.

I crossed my arms, hugging myself but pouring steel down my spine. I'd made this choice and now I'd see it through, even if that meant living.

"When does Durnth expect you to meet with him?"

"By noon tomorrow, or he'll assume I'm dead. He thinks you already are."

Cazien grunted. "And the horses?"

I looked at my feet, shifting my weight. "Said I'd take care of them."

"This route," he held up the map, "will take how long to get to the desolation on foot?"

"A week? Maybe more, maybe less. Depends on how hard we push, and if we run into the Kanoi."

"Then we'd better get a move on." Cazien pulled the pack on and strode past me, his arm almost clipping me.

I followed him down the path we'd hiked up, the setting sun forcing us to go slow. With the sun gone, the Aeanean jungle came to life with sound as all of the insects and reptiles finally braved the open air. At least there wasn't stone silence, I doubted I could survive that.

Cazien stopped, and jerked his head for me to go on.

"Clear it."

I stomped past him into the clearing we'd made camp the day before. Someone had gone through my things, leaving the remains strewn over the ground. Cian whickered a greeting and I made my way over to the mares.

Neither of them lacked for gear, and I hoped one or two men nearly lost their fingers for trying to unload them.

"I know," I whispered as I scratched Cian's chin. "I'm glad to see you again too."

Nixus tossed her head and plodded towards the trail I'd come from. Cazien met her at the edge of the clearing, his hand going to her neck as he looked her over.

"I don't see any sign of them," I called, keeping my voice low. "Looks like the lure of gold set a fire at their heels."

"And not a single one of them cared enough to help you." Cazien's voice held rebuke, not for the men but for me as well.

I swallowed my retort, focusing instead on Cian, who leaned in to my scratches.

"Get what you need from the saddlebags," Cazien said from behind me. "Then secure the reins. They'll be headed back to Sanaty."

I whirled. "How will they do that?"

He didn't grace me with a look as he wrote something, parchment laid over the saddle. "Nixus and Cian aren't regular horses. They've been trained far beyond a typical warhorse. They'll make their way back to the last town or village when given an order."

I frowned in consideration. A horse who could be trusted to return to civilization meant that an injured rider could strap themselves to the saddle. How many times had Cazien relied on Nixus to get him to help?

I bit my lower lip as I unhooked the saddlebags. I didn't keep any weapons in them, a choice I regretted. But

between the saddlebags and the gear discarded by my former associates, I had enough to make do.

Securing the reins like he'd ordered, I cupped Cian's large face in my hands as I looked into her right eye. "Stay safe," I murmured, her ears pricking towards me. "Sanaty is a good man. There are predators in these woods, though. Not just the big cats."

Cian shoved her head into my shoulder and I smiled, weak but real.

If Cazien said anything to his mare, I didn't hear it. I backed away from the roan, and Cazien barked a word in a foreign language, and gave a light slap to Nixus's rump. The black mare disappeared down the trail, her tail held high, Cian following at a brisk pace.

Cazien was near me, but there was a wall between us I knew couldn't be breached. I may as well have been alone. Cazien pulled out a torch, striking the flint stone twice to light it. He didn't offer to let me carry one, but with how many bugs the light attracted, I was glad for it.

"We won't be able to go more than a few hours." I made my way down the main trail. "I'm not sure how far ahead Durnth is. And I wasn't lying when I told Cian about predators in the woods. They hunt at night."

"They've yet to bother us."

I didn't look back at him, focusing on my shadow as it flickered across the trees.

"We were also in a much larger group."

He said nothing other than a grunt of understanding.

My father and I had rarely traveled at night; only doing so when absolutely required. The torch light reflected off of

thousands of insect eyes, and I fought back a shudder.

We hiked for an hour before we found the turnoff. I crouched at the fork, gesturing for Cazien to lower the torch for me to see better. To my surprise, he did.

"No tracks," he said, confirming what I didn't see. We both looked back to the main path. "Looks like they didn't take the turnoff."

"Durnth doesn't know about it." I stepped off the main path and onto the much narrower one. "We have about three miles before I suggest we camp. I don't want to enter the Kanoi territory at night if I can help it."

Would he demand we keep going? We'd have to stay at least three nights in their territory, regardless. Those nights promised to be tense and restless.

"You're the guide," was his infuriating and bland answer.

The path was crowded with trees and vines, the ground littered with branches and rocks. It'd been a long time since it'd been regularly walked and that did nothing to comfort me. Parts of the path climbed up the mountainside, and my thighs burned by the time we reached the furthest point I'd take us.

The air hadn't cooled too much, which promised a storm in the coming days. It was the nature of Aeaea, storms and oppressive heat battling against one another like Agni and Sedus.

I found us a clearing large enough for the tent and a small fire. I went to work clearing the area while Cazien prepared the tent. In this, at least, we were able to fall back into the routine we'd discovered.

We didn't need to talk as I helped guide the support rods through the loops to raise the roof. We worked fast, despite only having a single torch for light.

I stared at the completed tent and contemplated throwing myself off the nearest mountain ledge instead.

"I'll take first watch."

I looked at him while he lowered the torch flame into the kindling he'd gathered. The fire would produce smoke, but if we kept it small enough, it could go unnoticed.

"What?"

He didn't look up. He rolled the torch against the ground, extinguishing it.

"I'll take first watch," he repeated before meeting my eyes. The moonlight reflected off of his eyes, making them seem as black as they'd been when he'd woken from the drug. "In case you and Durnth had something planned."

I ground my teeth. I deserved that. I wrestled with my bedroll, looking around for a place to put it. I really didn't want to wake up damp, but I didn't want to be too close to the fire either.

"For fuck's sake, Minerva." Cazien's jaw was clenched. "Sleep in the damn tent."

"Right," I snapped back, my chaotic emotions molding into irritation. "I forgot. You don't want to see my face."

He growled but I didn't care. I threw the bedroll down like it'd personally offended me.

"Why didn't you kill me back there?"

The small fire illuminated his face, casting shadows along his sharp cheekbones. It meant I could see his

elegant eyebrow raise in question. “Because I paid you to do a job.”

I crossed my arms. “Bullshit.”

“Excuse me?”

“You killed your godsdamned fiancée days before your wedding.”

I didn’t care anymore. I needed him to react—to be something other than this granite statue walking behind me. Even if that meant sticking my hands into the fire of his wrath.

“I’m no one. Just someone you hired to take you across an island and you don’t even need me anymore.”

He glared at the flames.

“Is this some sick joke to you?” My irritation grew into real anger. “You get some satisfaction at toying with your victims before you gut them? Do you want me to beg and plead for my life, Cazien? Is that it?”

“Get your ass in the tent and sleep.”

“And if I refuse?”

He shrugged. “Then you’re more of an idiot than I thought.”

“When the hell did you think I was an idiot? When I wasn’t falling at your feet the first day?”

“No, you were more than happy to wait for a proper bed before letting me get my hands on you.”

That stung, and I took a step back from him. His head snapped up at the movement and his gaze locked on me. He rose, too smooth and silently for a man of his size, a cruel twisted smile marring his lips.

"You played your part well, Minerva," he cooed, and I snarled. "You were such the enticing morsel playing the bold girl who'd never even been kissed."

He stepped over the fire, right in front of me. We didn't touch, that wall between us keeping us parted, even as we sent volleys over, aiming to injure.

"You're quite the actress," Cazien continued, another insult with barbs landing against my chest. He tilted his head down, a parody of intimacy. "I admit, you were tight enough I really did think you were a virgin. Especially with all your talk of trust, and wanting it to be me, and being mine."

"Fuck you." I shoved him away from me but he only swayed before crowding me again.

"You already did," he snapped back. "What pisses you off more? That I figured you out or that you enjoyed my cock?"

I struck, and he caught my wrists. But I'd wanted him to, and when he grinned, I kicked my leg between his, hooking my ankle at the back of his knee and yanking forward. He buckled, and I twisted out of his grip, sending an elbow at his head. He fell to both knees, and I jumped out of his reach, crouched and ready to fight.

This wouldn't be like the fight in the captain's quarters on the ship. No, this one wasn't a test. It was real.

And I was fucking glad for it.

Cazien did not roar to his feet, face twisted with rage, like so many other men I knew. He stood, his eyes on mine, his face hard.

I had no weapon, and he drew his sword. He buried it halfway up the blade with one strike in front of the tent.

"That's terrible for the edge," I said.

He stretched his neck to both sides. "I'll take care of it."

He didn't remove any more blades—his challenge clear. He knew I didn't have a knife, but I could go for one of his. No doubt the moment I drew steel on him, he'd retaliate.

I watched him warily, every sense on edge as I waited. He straightened, his arms hanging at his sides as he returned my stare. His relaxation was a lie I refused to fall for.

"You were supposed to go with Brannen and Viridian when your brother was taken, weren't you?"

His eyes narrowed and I smirked. "That's why you're trying so hard to save him. You blame yourself."

"You say that as if I can't see how much you hate yourself for being a Hallows," he replied, voice rough. "Like I can't see how much of a scared little girl you really are. Always running away. Did you know that's what you'll be doing when you cross the Great Sea?"

I raised my chin. "Does your family know about the darkness inside you? It's from the demon, isn't it? Maybe you don't deserve the name Demonbane. Maybe instead of slaying it, you took it inside yourself."

He snarled, tension filling his posture, and I kept pressing.

"You did Nuria a favor, killing her. She wanted Brannen because she couldn't sleep with a monster. You saved her from being married to one."

"You had no issue," he growled but there were cracks in his fury.

I bared my teeth at him. “We’re both monsters in our own way.”

I launched myself towards him, dropping low to sweep my leg out. He leapt, his knees raising to his chest as he avoided the strike.

Cazien landed, turning it into a lunge before I’d finished the sweep, his large hand grabbing my shoulder and throwing me to the ground.

I rolled, controlling it, and crouched, balancing myself with my hands against the hard leaf-covered ground.

He came at me, and I moved to the left. I rammed my shoulder into his ribs as his arms banded around my chest. Slotting my foot between his, I sent us careening towards the ground again.

We grappled, no longer trading painful barbs. Instead, there were only grunts as one of us landed a hit, but neither of us gained the upper hand.

Agni flowed through my veins, the god of my birthplace, giving me strength to fight against the pain in my heart. Every time I struck at him, every howl of rage that ripped from my throat, I was trying to wrench him from my heart.

I wasn’t fighting Cazien, the man, but the love I held for him. I needed him purged from me, needed every trace of him gone from my soul.

I reached around him, fisting his doublet and thrusting my hips up, trying to roll him off of me. It worked, only because he rolled too, forcing me to cling to my hold of him or risk letting him pin me. The move however, let me slide one of the daggers from his bandolier free.

I swung it wildly, his fingers wrapping around my wrist and pinning it to the ground.

I punched him, my fist landing awkwardly against his jaw, but it was enough to rock him. He let go of my wrist and I was shoved to my back again. He threw himself on top of me, his forearm bearing down against my shoulders, his legs straddling my hips.

I tilted my head back as the sharp point of a dagger met the soft flesh under my chin. I retaliated, pressing my own blade hard enough against his side, in a spot we both knew would be fatal.

Our gazes warred as we stared at each other, snarls on both of our faces.

A pained growl ripped from his chest. "I couldn't do it."

Cazien kissed me.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



I dropped the blade, instead fisting his doublet as I opened myself to him. I didn't care about the prick of pain as the knife drew a drop of blood. I didn't care that I'd given myself up. I only cared about this kiss, something I'd resigned myself to never experiencing again.

Cazien tossed the knife away, skittering across the hard ground and disappearing into the dark where the light of the fire didn't reach. He removed the weight from my chest, sore enough I expected a bruise from it. His kiss was unbridled, but he was wary—like a wild animal easily spooked. Waiting, no doubt, to see if I'd pick the dagger back up and end him.

I kissed him harder, releasing him as I reached blindly for the dagger. He pulled away as I hissed, the blade cutting into my palm. I grabbed his neck with my other hand, my gaze staying on his face as my fingers wrapped around the hilt.

Cazien the warrior hovered over me, his eyes revealing the chaos his face refused to show. The fire cast shadows over the elegant planes of his face, shrouding him half in

darkness. His tousled hair fell down around his face, a curtain hiding the real heart behind the beastly exterior.

"I knew I couldn't days ago." I threw the dagger away from us.

I rose up to meet him as he descended on me, his hands going to my waist. He moved back, yanking my shirt up and off, my breastband quickly following. Cazien wasted no time in pushing me back down, his sinful lips wrapping around a peaked nipple.

Everything was more heightened than earlier. Our need more desperate. There wasn't only desire and lust in our movements. His mouth covered me in harsh kisses, anger mixed in with his desire.

When I tugged off his own bandolier and shirt, I raked my nails along his back with a snarl, my frustration leaving trails in my wake.

There was nothing gentle about him tearing off my boots, my pants quickly following. And I made him growl as I ripped open the laces to his own pants, shoving my hand inside and gripping him.

Cazien kneed my thighs apart, slipping between them as my bare back arched against the harsh ground. He kissed me, biting and tugging at my lower lip as he slid inside me. I gasped, arching against him even as I tried to push away from the stab of discomfort as he filled me unexpectedly.

He paused above me, his eyebrows growing closer as he took me in. His pupils were so dilated his eyes may as well have been black, but there was no sign of that eerie darkness that frightened the primal part of me.

“Do”—he swallowed hard, his voice guttural, boulders rumbling down a mountainside—“Do you want this?”

The discomfort was still there, but I knew it wouldn’t last. And even if it didn’t? I wanted it. I needed to feel every part of him inside me. I locked my legs around his, digging my heels into the backs of his thighs as I bit his lower lip, hard enough to taste blood.

“Fuck me, Cazien,” I all but ordered.

He grinned at me, and my eyes went to his swollen lip and the bruise already forming on the side of his jaw. It hadn’t been my kiss that gave it to him.

“Ask nicely, darling,” he purred, rotating his hips against me, pressing against my bundle of nerves. “I think you owe me that much, at least.”

“Fuck you, Talon.”

I’d been pinned like this before, though admittedly never with a man’s cock inside me. Still, he wasn’t prepared, and I moved, flipping us over until he was under me.

My hands went to his chest and his hands caught my hips, guiding me as I sank down on him.

We both groaned at the sensation. Cazien’s breath left him in a whoosh as I moved, feeling him touch every inch inside of me.

His eyes were half closed, but still made my stomach flip with even more arousal. I’d thought the full weight of his attention during discussions was intense, but it was nothing compared to this. He might be under me, and he might be able to rip me off him with a single pull, but he—Cazien Demonbane Talon—wanted me here, taking him like this.

I bit my lower lip, circling my hips, and his fingers dug into me as his eyes closed, his lips parted as his chest moved raggedly under my hands. When I stopped moving, his eyes opened again.

“I don’t know—”

He sat up, his stomach muscles curling and clenching under me until we were almost face to face, his arms wrapping around me. He was so much taller than me that even in his lap, I was below eye level.

“Like this,” he whispered, our foreheads touching. One hand went to my rear, guiding me up slowly, before lowering me. I watched where I took him in, and when I looked back to his face, I knew it mirrored my own. “Just like riding a horse.”

I panted out a facsimile of a laugh. He guided me, the discomfort completely gone, replaced with the need to consume him.

I braced myself on his shoulders, holding tight to him as he leaned back, his free hand back behind him, stabilizing him as I moved.

Every stroke filled me, but there was something—something out of reach that my body knew it wanted. I angled my hips, leaning forward and putting more of my weight against him as I slid down.

Pleasure shot through me, heat flushing through me that had nothing to do with the weather or the fire.

“That’s it, darling,” he breathed.

That endearment, I hated that name. But when he said it like that, said it like I was breaking him, it made a moan grow deep in my chest.

I focused on that pleasure, where our bodies touched. Our hips moving together, his hand on my ass, where my breasts would graze his chest, my hands on his shoulders, the tense muscles bunching under my grip, and where our foreheads met.

We both panted, watching where we joined, and I moved faster, my body urging me on. Over and over, I took Cazien into me, my anger melding into something else, something as fierce.

My eyes drifted closed as I focused on that spot inside me, making him stroke it, listening to his rough breaths. Even after the fight with the men, he hadn't sounded so out of breath.

Knowing it was me doing this to him, knowing he wanted me, that he watched where I took him, sent bolts of pleasure up through my spine, forcing my head to fall back as I sought to throw myself over the edge.

Cazien's mouth latched onto my pulse point, the harsh graze of his teeth followed by the searing lap of his tongue. Everything snapped within me, and I cried out as I rode the crest of pleasure before sinking into its depths. I drowned, its willing victim, as Cazien moved us.

He'd flipped us over, one hand planted beside my head and the other arm wrapped around my lower back lifting my hips from the ground. Wicked, broken sounds spilled from my lips.

I pleaded with him, needing more and more and more. Not with words, I was too gone to form anything sensible. But Cazien knew. He responded with his own feral

language. His thrusts grew shallow, deeper, though never less intense.

He watched my face, drinking me in, and there was something there, beyond the surface of his desire that made my own heart respond.

Recognizing it sent waves of a second climax over me, my back arching as my mouth dropped open in a pained whine. Cazien swooped down, devouring the sound before he loosed a broken howl against my lips as he found his own release, collapsing over me.

I held him, my hands splayed over his sweaty muscled back, tracing the scars as I moved without thought. His own face was buried against my neck and shoulder, his breath coming in pants against my skin. He still held me to him, his thumb stroking my skin.

We lay there, refusing to move out of that moment. There was no treasure, there was no betrayal, Viridian was safe, and I had never been stolen from this island.

What would it have been like, if we'd met under different circumstances? Would we have spared one another a glance, or walked by and never known this urgency that demanded to be met?

He breathed deep, the long exhale followed by him slipping from me. I winced, everything sore from the fight and what followed. Cazien stilled, his hand brushing the loose hair from my sweat-slicked forehead.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m good,” I assured him, my voice hoarse. I tried for a smile. “I could do with some water, though.”

His stare hardened, like he wasn't sure if he could believe me. I didn't look away when I spoke next, needing to defend myself. "I didn't lie about being a virgin, Cazien."

Shame washed over his face and he rolled off me, which was the opposite reaction I'd wanted. I sat up, wrapping my arms around my bare chest after losing his body heat. The Aeanean summer had nothing on the furnace Cazien was.

He shook out our clothes, unabashedly nude, and I stayed still, growing numb, as he deposited everything—even my discarded bedroll and our forgotten blades—in the tent.

"Do you regret this?" I asked, struggling to mask my apprehension. "I—"

"No," Cazien interrupted me, crouching down. He scooped me into his arms and I wrapped my own around his neck out of instinct. I pulled back enough to watch him as he took the few steps towards the tent.

He deposited me on the two bedrolls, laid directly against each other in the middle, with an endearing gentleness that was so opposite of his touch minutes ago.

Before I could say or do anything, he slipped back out of the tent. I hugged my legs to my chest, watching his shadow until it disappeared. He must have extinguished the fire.

"Aren't you worried about Durnth?" I asked when he came back in. The moon was nearly full and there were no clouds in the sky, so I could see him if not well.

He stretched out alongside me, and I tried not to lean into his warmth. His hand, gentle but insistent, grabbed my shoulder and guided me down alongside him.

"No," he answered when I'd pillowed my head on his arm. "If you'd arranged for them to follow us, they'd have been idiots to not strike during that."

I thought about the things I'd said, the insults and accusations I'd thrown at him. The ones he'd thrown at me. I opened my mouth twice, closing it each time as I wasn't sure what to say. The warmth of him coated the inside of my thighs, and I stiffened.

"Hmm?" he asked.

I shoved upwards, heart in my throat. "I'm not on anything," I blurted. I spread my legs, looking down despite the dark, like I could glare my way out of the chance of pregnancy.

He yanked me back down. "I am." He sounded half asleep.

"What do you mean?"

He let out a sigh, my head raising and falling on his chest. "After the night in Grotto, I made sure to request the right preventative for men."

I sat up again, irritation and embarrassment coiling around my throat. "You expected me to throw myself at you?" I'd never been so offended.

"Gods above, woman," he cursed, again yanking me back down. "No, I'd no doubts you'd be able to resist my most alluring charms."

"Then why?"

"Because I knew there'd be no way *I'd* be able to resist *you* if you indicated even the smallest interest."

"Oh." Like that, my offense was washed away. Confusion took its place. "So, what do we do now?"

Cazien was silent, but I could feel the thoughts churning inside of him. I waited, letting myself sink into his warmth, molding myself against the hard planes of his body. Even relaxed, he felt like a warrior. This high of elevation meant the nights were colder, if still no less humid.

When I shifted a leg over his, he palmed my thigh, adjusting me until I was practically half on top of him. I bit my lip to stop the smile from forming, but I gave into the urge to stroke the sparse chest hair under my hand. Cazien kissed the top of my head in response. I couldn't stop the smile then, nor the fluttering in my chest.

"We keep going." He was quiet and resolute. "I"—he took a breath and I held my own—"believe what you told me, down by the pools. I'm choosing to trust you, that you won't turn against me later."

I blinked, floored at his words. I sensed no dishonesty in his words, and under me, he was tense, like he struggled with the decision.

Tears lined my eyes and I pressed my lips in a kiss against his chest. I ignored the tear that spilled out, landing on him under me. My heart raced, faster than when we'd fought earlier, faster than when I'd run from my captors a decade earlier.

I crawled up over him, his arms moving to hold me, and kissed him over and over. "I should never have said those things to you." I kissed him again, willing him to accept the closest to an apology I could get. "You aren't a monster, Cazien. I never believed you were."

He quaked beneath me, his hands gliding up my back and burying in my hair. "You were right, though." His voice

was rough. "I was supposed to go with Brannen. I was gone, and that's why he let Viridian take my place."

I kissed him, a tender chaste press against his own. When I pulled away, he kept speaking.

"And I am a monster." He didn't let me interrupt him. "I'd have to be, to kill someone I thought I loved, even if know now that I didn't. Not really." He guided me back down against him, and I buried my face against his neck, breathing in his warm spice and sage. The scent I'd accepted never smelling again.

"I shouldn't have called you an actress," he continued, his voice stronger as his hand rubbed soothing strokes along my back and side. "I knew you were telling the truth about being a virgin. No one is that good of an actress."

I snorted, thinking of some of the women I knew working in the brothels of the Hallows' territory. He tweaked my nose.

"I know there are women who can act," he drawled. "But from your kisses, even that first one on the ship, and later how you responded at the inn, I knew somehow you'd survived in a damn street gang without losing that part of yourself."

I pushed away the pain his words had caused earlier, knowing he'd done what I had—lashed out because of pain. We'd cornered each other, and cornered, injured animals lashed out. It was our nature. Instead, I closed my eyes, letting myself relax.

"They never knew," I confessed. "I refused to live at the headquarters, the tavern and gambling hall. One of them teased me about my lovers and I never corrected them.

They knew I'd never sleep with one of them, not after a few paid the consequences for trying." He tensed, his grip on me tightening and I pressed a kiss to his neck. "Don't worry. I left them with a few less fingers and a permanent warning to anyone else."

He let out a long breath, and my eyes widened as his cock twitched. "It shouldn't, but the thought of you besting those assholes makes me want to get on my knees and lick you until you scream."

I laughed, loud and throaty, before nuzzling back into Cazien's embrace.

"Let's stay focused on finding Xanu's hoard before the others," I said, a gentle reminder of the task at hand. "Then I promise to tell you about all the ways I've made men bleed."

"Promise?" His voice was all husky and deep, desire uncurling within me in response.

"Promise. Now we should sleep—"

Cazien rolled on top of me, his long length hard against my stomach. "Suddenly, I'm not very tired." He peppered my throat with kisses as he worked his way lower.

"Fine," I said, failing to sound annoyed. "But we won't be able to do this tomorrow, when we're in the Kanoi's territory."

I swore a feral grin flashed on his face despite the darkness. I did hear his growl as he nipped the inside of my thigh, and I raked my nails across his scalp before guiding his mouth to my core.

Tomorrow, we'd face the Kanoi, and later risk Durnth's wrath. But for tonight, we'd have this.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



**P**ain woke me from slumber. I rolled away from Cazien, groaning as I curled in on myself, eyes squeezed tight.

He sat up behind me, his hand landing on my shoulder, and frowned in concern.

“Minerva?”

I groaned, both in pain and embarrassment. I could feel how slick my thighs were, and I knew it was more than from our activities. There was no other cause for the pain taking over my abdomen.

Oh, hell, I’d been lying on him—did I—

“Sorry,” I muttered, eyes still closed. “Should have kept better track.”

“What—ah.”

Mortification sent a full-body blush across me. I swallowed hard.

“Give me a minute, and I’ll get up and we can get an early start.”

He got to his knees, reaching for my bag. “Are your cycles usually difficult?” How was he so calm? He found the

cycle pads I'd buried in the bottom of my pack and I snapped upright, grabbing them from his hands. I must have looked scandalized from his soft laugh. Then his eyes traveled down towards where my thighs and the bedroll, and dammit, even his leg, were bloodied.

I fell back, praying for Agni to release his wrath from the volcano and kill me.

Cazien crawled over me, tugging my hands from my face. I don't know what I expected, but I definitely didn't expect the serious look he had.

"Do I need to pretend to not exist for the next week? Or maybe find a Kanoi to barter with for sweets? Should I hide all the knives?"

I sputtered. "What are you talking about?"

"Morgan is a right terror on her cycle." His sister, right. "When we realize she's on it, even Brannen finds a reason to get out of her path. I pity her future husband."

He said it with such conviction and sorrow that I laughed, loud, despite the cramps in my lower stomach.

"I thought you said she wasn't engaged?" I pushed him off me. "Sorry about that, by the way." I gestured vaguely to his leg and he looked down in surprise.

Cazien shrugged. "Blood is blood. And at least it's natural for this blood to leave the body—" He cut off as I hissed, another cramp tormenting my womanhood.

"You should rest," he said, guiding me back to the bedroll.

"I need to clean up," I argued. "And we need to get going."

A cork popped and I yelped when a cool cloth wiped efficiently at my thighs. "What are you doing?" I scrambled to sit up, but it only made the cramps worse.

"We can take an hour or two." He looked up at the canvas tent, glowing with the soft light of early dawn. "We're up earlier than we would be anyways." He lowered his gaze back to me, a sly grin on his lips.

I narrowed my eyes at him. "What?"

"I've heard that sexual pleasure can help ease the pain."

I gaped at him and shoved him with my foot. "No, no, no." I shook my head and he laughed, raising his hands up in surrender. He scooped up his pack and the bloodied bedroll and slipped out of the tent before poking his head back in.

"If you change your mind, I'll be right here."

He pulled back before the wet cloth slapped against the tent.

The cycle clothes were in their own small bag and I breathed out with relief when I still had some of the willow bark powder. I wrestled clothing on, setting the cloth with a grimace. The first day was always the worst for me, which meant extra stops today.

Extra stops in the Kanoi territory was not something encouraged.

I lay back on my side, legs curled into my chest as my womb rebelled and dragged my lower back into the war. I cursed being a woman. Men didn't have to deal with this, and it was entirely unfair.

The tent opened again and I glared at Cazien, making him smile.

"So do I need to worry about my neck?" He held up a small cup, steam coming from it, and a heavy-looking bag.

"Depends on what that is."

He handed the cup to me, the steam smelling of mint. I wrapped my hands around it appreciatively, inhaling the soothing scent.

"Here." He guided my knees down enough that he could reach my stomach. He pressed the bag against my stomach, and I wanted to weep. It was so warm. "This always helps Morgan."

"I could kiss you right now," I said without thought and then stared at him wide-eyed.

"I wouldn't be entirely opposed," he teased, before leaning forward and pressing his lips against mine. "When you can move without wanting to stab something, I'll break down the tent."

I took a sip of the hot tea, easing my cramps from within. "I can help."

He shrugged. "If I were injured, would you make me help?"

"This is different," I argued. "I can't let it affect my job else I'd never have made it this far."

He crouched until we were eye level. Shadowed but the morning light coming in through the open flap behind him, he was an imposing figure. He'd pulled his hair back into the infuriating bun that made me smile and he'd discarded the doublet for a simple black tunic. I could make out the whorls of embroidery in a deep red along the collar and tops of his shoulders.

He grabbed my chin, firm but not enough to hurt. “This isn’t affecting your ability to do your duties. I have no doubt if we had to leave at this moment, you would and could. But we do not have to leave and I do not need assistance to prepare for the day. If you’re miserable now and don’t take care of it, you could slow us down later—right?”

I scowled at him, and he let me go, ruffling my hair. He knew he had me.

“At least let me out of the tent,” I grumbled, shoving the tea and hot bag back into his hands. I swiped up my cycle sack and the rest of my packs after shoving my feet back into my boots and followed him out of the tent.

He didn’t comment as I hunched forward, my lips pressed as I held back a groan. When I sank by the small fire, he handed me back the tea and bag, the latter I gratefully pressed back against my stomach. I poured some of the willow bark powder into the tea. It made the drink bitter, but I knew it’d make the rest of the day bearable.

The sun fully rose up over the horizon and by the time Cazien had packed up, the willow bark and heated bag had eased the cramps. I dumped the stones out of the bag and put the fire out, and when Cazien pulled on his pack, I was able to rise with little more than a grimace. At least he didn’t offer to carry my packs—maybe his experience with his sister and the fact that I wore all of my knives again made him think better of it.

We set off, eastward, into the thick woods, the trail no wider than a deer track. The main trail lower on the mountain had dominated the jungle—removing trees or vegetation as required. This trail moved at the mercy of the

landscape. It didn't take long until our attention was fully absorbed by scanning the trees and watching our steps for loose rocks or hidden roots.

At least the trek helped ease some of my cramps, but it was only a few hours before I was forced to stop and change the cloths.

"Any sign of the Kanoi?" Cazien pitched his voice low as he studied the landscape while I grumbled with the cloths.

"No," I answered righting my pants and shoving the offending cloth into its pouch. I had enough to last most of the trip, so at least I didn't have to try to wash them out at each stop.

"There are three different tribes of Kanoi, and when we get farther into the territory, we should see the totems that will let us know which tribe this is."

He gave me a sidelong glance. "You don't know?"

I stared back. "Usually people avoid going through the Kanoi territories at all cost. If anyone knew what tribe this was, they didn't survive long enough to tell someone."

He blinked and blew out a long breath, his hand going to the hilt of his sword.

"Any sign of Zypher?" I asked, stepping around him and continuing the hike.

"No." He sounded disturbed. "He's not a normal eagle. So he's likely hunting the map and not me, specifically."

I scrambled over a knee-high boulder blocking the path, "What do you mean?"

"Zypher is from a fae kingdom," he explained, pausing as he stepped over the same boulder. "Two years ago, Gavret

disappeared for months. Considering we'd already lost one brother, you can imagine my mother didn't take it well."

I snorted.

"Then suddenly he shows up at the estate, looking like he'd been through hell and back. Zypher was with him."

I glanced over my shoulder. "What happened to him?"

Cazien's lips went flat, his face hard. "He hasn't told anyone. But whatever it was, it changed him. He's still who he always was, but there's something more... animalistic about him. All he said was that Zypher chose him and that was it."

I shuddered, thinking about all the different possibilities. Then I thought of Gavret laughing and flipping Cazien off after dinner and the rest of the guests had left. No matter what had happened to him, Gavret still loved his brother—that much was obvious.

"Durnth wants to catch the bird and send a coded message," I said, though I'd briefly mentioned it the day before. "I don't think Durnth would be stupid enough to order the men on the ship killed. He needs crew to sail the ship back."

"I've seen Zypher break a great elk's spine in one dive. I think whoever tries to capture him will regret it."

"I hope Durnth does it personally."

"So bloodthirsty, darling." His purr made me bite my lip and fight a blush, even though my back was to him.

We scrambled over the fallen logs which crossed a narrow but deep ravine, water echoing up from the dark. The sun continued to rise, the green canopy overhead shading us but trapping the humidity in the air.

Birds, frogs, and even the occasional primate family called out to one another, filling the comfortable silence we'd fallen into. Unease wrapped around my shoulders, my hair raising on my arms and neck. I slowed, my hand going to my preferred dagger at my waist.

Cazien stepped up to my side, alert. "What is it?" He was hardly louder than a breath.

I didn't answer right away, scanning the tree canopy around us, then the tree trunks themselves.

"Not sure yet," I answered and kept going.

We kept quiet, Cazien closer to me than before. Even the wildlife sounds had dimmed as if they too were on edge.

Half a mile later, I stopped, holding my fist up. I pointed ahead with a grimace.

"I feel like I'm missing some information," Cazien growled.

I kept looking at the bloodied spine and pelvis of some unfortunate animal hanging from a tree branch overhead.

"There are three tribes of Kanoi." I slid my dagger from its sheath. "All of them are brutal to a degree. Cannibals to some degree. Two of the tribes are made up of humans, or might as well be."

Cazien snarled, drawing his sword with a matching hiss. "Let me guess, this one isn't?"

I nodded, walking again, warily watching where I put my feet. "I really had hoped this tribe wasn't here. Watch your step, they use pitfalls."

"What are they?"

"Half-fae. The bad kind."

“Great.” I nearly slipped on the sarcasm coming from Cazien. “So, we’ve got three days of walking through the territory of a cannibalistic half-fae tribe known for their brutality.”

“I just hope if they catch us, I’m dead before they start feeding.” Fear raced through me, but I stayed steady. Fear would only get us killed out here, and I believed what I’d told Cazien days ago. One or two people had a good chance at making it through the territory unnoticed. The Kanoi could be camped lower, their hunters far away from this path.

By the time we found a shallow but dry cave to stay the night in, both Cazien and I were short-tempered, our nerves frayed. We had to rely on the food that didn’t require cooking, since we couldn’t risk even a small fire. A stomach full of dry, bland oat cakes and only our bedroll and thin cloak for warmth promised a miserable night and we didn’t dare both sleep.

Cazien took the first watch, waking me when he couldn’t stay awake any longer. I huddled at the entrance of the cave, my cloak pulled around me, and tried not to jump at every sound.

The harsh calls of the giant primates who made the trees their homes howled across the night, sharp and aggressive. Farther from the cave, the underbrush rustled as something large moved through it—all I could hear was snorting and the cracking of twigs.

By the time the soft sunlight of morning broke through the trees, Cazien was already up and neither of us felt

rested at all. Mechanically we ate another oat cake each, drinking half the water we had left, and set out again.

We stopped only when necessary, unable to speak except when required. We refilled the water bottles and one canteen, using the purifying talisman Cazien had to ensure its safety.

Grisly reminders of whose territory this was were strung up at random intervals. Some of the remains looked like animals, and others were distinctly human. At least the human remains were old, whereas some of the animal flesh couldn't have been there for longer than two weeks.

Three times, both of us paused, waiting for an attack as we felt eyes on us. But none ever came, not even when we narrowly avoided snare traps or pitfalls.

The second night passed much the same as the first, though we had to take shelter in the hold of a tree with massive buttress roots. Neither of us slept much, the sensation of being watched too strong.

It was worse in the morning, and by unspoken agreement, we increased our pace. The trail weaved through the jungle, up and down over the ridges of the land, and made my entire body ache. Exhaustion lined both of our faces, and when the sun set on the third night, neither of us suggested finding a stopping place.

The full moon was at its peak when we finally were forced to stop to sleep for a few hours, and before the sun had risen, we were moving again.

There were no sounds filling the forest that morning and we traded uneasy looks. Cazien stepped up to me, his hand going to the back of my neck.

"Almost there."

I swallowed, my throat dry. "Almost there," I answered. I couldn't kiss him. It'd feel too much like a goodbye.

The first signs of the Kanoi were strange calls. I knew they were tracking us when I guided us down an animal track. We couldn't run, not without risking injury and encouraging their hunting instinct. When they'd caught up to us twice after I was certain we'd lost them, realization sank in.

"They're tracking me." I slowed to a stop in a moderate clearing. Two trees had fallen, opening up the canopy to the bright sky above, the foliage not yet taken over the new space.

"What do you mean?" Cazien gulped down the water before handing me the bottle. I accepted gratefully.

"I mean, they're tracking my scent," I said. "My cycle."

He grimaced, glaring into the forest. "By my guess there are six or seven. You?"

I nodded, capping the water bottle. "Same. Maybe eight. I don't think there are more."

Cazien dropped his pack at the base of the tree and inspected the blades along his bandolier and the two on his belt. "You ever fight a half-fae like this?"

I shook my head. "Always made it a point to not get tangled up with half-fae."

"Go for the head," he said, voice clipped. I dropped my own pack next to his, the exhaustion fleeing from my limbs replaced by adrenaline. "Heart wounds won't kill them. Cut off their limbs to slow them if you can."

The jungle had quieted completely. Not even the buzz of insects filled the air. I followed Cazien to the center of the small clearing, my back to his.

Sweat rolled down my forehead and along my cheek as the sun glared down. My tunic clung to my back, and my palms were sweaty enough that I had to keep adjusting my grip.

They were out there. I could feel them watching us, sizing us up. Were we worth the effort as prey? I refused to think of the stories village elders had told my father on our journeys, when they thought I was asleep.

I'd slit my own neck before letting them drag me into those trees.

A shrill call rent the air, sending chills down my spine. A second answered, then a third. Then the calls surrounded us. They'd decided.

## CHAPTER TWENTY



The first Kanoi stepped out of the shadows beside a tree I'd sworn had no one next to it a moment before.

"Ugly bastards," Cazien grumbled behind me and a snarl answered him.

"Maybe don't piss them off even more?" I forced the words through gritted teeth.

He wasn't wrong, though. Feral half-fae like these were disconcerting to look at. Overall, they looked human, but only if someone tugged and pulled at them until they were gangly and strangely proportioned. As more appeared, they were all the same—impossibly slender, like they had been starving for months. Even their elongated faces, streaked with dried blood and other things I didn't want to think about, were gaunt.

Neither Cazien nor I were fools, though. They looked weak but were anything but. And we were exhausted, on little sleep and little food.

When we'd fought back-to-back against the crew, our opponents didn't know how to work together. The Kanoi

circled us like a wolf pack at the edge of the clearing. We had guessed right, five of them watched us from the shadows while the other two faced off with us.

"Remember what I said?" Cazien's voice was steady and I envied him. I had to force my knees to stay still. He thought himself a monster? Well, for our sake, I hoped he was because the monsters in front of me were terrifying.

"Go for the head." I replied, gripping my dagger tighter. It was the length of my forearm, and I'd been fine getting in close with the men, but these things? I'd do what I had to.

The one facing me had a strange club, wicked spikes at the rounded end.

He wore the same thing the rest of them did, a tattered loincloth wrapped around their waist, held there with braided rope. And off the rope hung the trophies of their kills. I gulped at the pair of dark human ears. If any of them were female, it was impossible to tell them apart.

Some of them had strange tattoos on their ash-colored skin, and the one facing me had them all along his chest and arms. The part of me that was once an ancient animal knew this meant he was very, very deadly.

Well, screw him. I snarled right back at him.

"Want to play a game?"

I didn't take my eyes off of the half-fae. "I don't think this is an appropriate time for games."

"Sure it is." We moved together, responding to the half-fae's circling. "It's simple. Whoever kills more wins a prize."

I snorted, my nerves vanishing. "Like gold?"

"I was thinking more along the lines of orgasms, but sure, gold works."

They'd had enough of waiting, and the two Kanoi charged us.

I raised both daggers in anticipation. "You're ridiculous!"

He grunted, his opponent hissing and the smell of blood rising. "You're—" He grunted again. "Just worried you'll lose."

I rolled my eyes, dodging the club swung at me. I swiped out, the blade sinking into the half-fae's wrist but not enough to sever it. "You're on."

This close, they really were ugly bastards. They stank, too, like rotted meat. I'd avoided the half-fae's strikes, but beyond the first blood, I'd only managed to piss him off. I couldn't get close enough without putting myself in a vulnerable position.

I sheathed the smaller dagger, swapping the longer one to my left hand as I drew a wicked blade from my bandolier.

"That's one for me." Cazien grunted as he jerked his sword up through the skull of the Kanoi, kicking the half-fae's body to the ground. It distracted my opponent, and I threw the blade. It sank into his cheek, and I cursed.

I leapt at him, his club dropped as he tried to pull out my blade. I flipped the blade in my hand and hammered it into the half-fae's eye with a grunt. The blade dragged against the bone, but then sank in through flesh and he crumbled to the ground.

"One—shit." I ripped out both of my blades as the rest charged us.

I learned to fight in the street, against other gangs and sometimes even other Hallows. I bore the scars on my body,

proving my mettle. I'd never be called graceful with the blades, and I rarely had use for a sword.

Once I realized that these Kanoi were bloodthirsty versions of a street gang, my terror disappeared. The fear was still there, but it no longer threatened to overwhelm me.

Cazien, though, he was beautiful. His face a mask of cold brutality, he wove a deadly dance between heartbeats. The Kanoi came at us in waves and Cazien led me in his deadly waltz. He had greater reach with his sword, striking through limbs with ease. I flowed behind him, my daggers finding their way into eye sockets or behind the pointed ears.

Cazien spun, blocking an attack, and the man smiled at me—feral and with sheer enthusiasm. His face splattered with blood, his hair whipping from the bun at the back of his head.

I grinned back before whirling on my heel to block another half-fae.

Neither of us avoided blows. One Kanoi managed to ram his club against my thigh, thankfully missing with the spikes, and I'd be limping for days no doubt. I buried my dagger in its wrist before shoving another one through the top of its skull.

There were no more in front of me and I turned, Cazien facing the final one with a victorious grunt.

Around us, bodies slumped, blood thick in the air. Scavengers were already on their way, no doubt, eager for an easy meal.

One, two, three, four, five, six—I twisted around, looking for the missing half-fae. I was too late.

The bloodied half-fae, somehow alive despite the massive head wound, rose behind Cazien as the man pulled his sword free.

“Cazien!”

Time slowed as I staggered towards him, the half-fae’s cruel dagger slicing through the air. Cazien jerked away, raising his arm in defense, but it wasn’t enough.

A scream ripped through the air as I watched the blade slice into Cazien’s waist, a fan of blood following its trajectory. The scream turned from fear to rage and I realized it came from me.

Time resumed as I threw myself at the half-fae as Cazien staggered away, hand pressed against his side.

I tackled the half-fae to the ground, landing on its chest.

“Ugly fucking bastard.” My voice didn’t sound like my own. It snarled and I stabbed it, over and over, in its ugly face. When it wasn’t recognizable anymore, I staggered off of it to Cazien.

He swayed, his sword hanging limply in his hand, the other pressed against his wound as he looked at it in annoyance. He swayed harder, and I caught him around the shoulders as he fell to one knee.

“Fucking bastards,” he ground out, pulling his hand away. It was coated in bright red blood.

“Let me see it.” I moved to the other side, one hand trying to keep him steady as I pulled his tunic away from where it stuck to his skin. I swore.

“That bad, eh?” He was looking up at the sky.

"Stay here." I raced to the packs, looking for the first aid kit I knew he had. That, and one of his shirts in hand, I made my way back to him, where he'd sat back on the ground.

I dropped everything next to him and ripped his shirt into strips.

"I liked that shirt." His face was going pale and he hardly mustered up the energy to sound annoyed.

"You're rich enough to buy another one," I snapped back. I shook as I wrapped the white fabric around him, his blood staining it quickly. He grunted as I knotted it tight and wrapped another one around it.

"We need to get out of here." I scanned the trees. "We don't want to be here when the scavengers arrive and we need to get somewhere I can stitch that up."

He grunted, his hand searching for his discarded sword. With it as a cane and my help, we levered him back onto his feet. When he was steady, I went back for our packs, hauling mine on.

"Give me mine," Cazien said as I was about to pull his onto my other shoulder. "You can't carry both and I'm not too proud to admit I'm going to need help."

I wanted to argue, but the white of his shirt was nearly gone. With my help, he settled the pack on his back, and I sheathed the sword for him.

"I think you won," he said, between pants as I held his arm over my shoulder. He was so much taller than me, I felt useless, but the weight he rested on me scared me more than the Kanoi had. I wrapped my other arm around his back, fisting his tunic.

"Don't feel too bad," I replied. "I'll give you a grace period to deliver the prize."

He gave a weak laugh as we left the clearing, and I prayed we'd find a safe place to rest soon.

"I think we"—he hissed as his foot stumbled against an exposed root—"we both won. I've got plenty of ideas for your prize."

"Just don't die on me." Fear had crept its way into my voice.

He hummed, and I risked a look at him. His normally sun-kissed skin was ashen, his eyes half-lidded.

"Fuck," I muttered and tried to increase our pace. I jostled him and he groaned. "Tell me about your ideas, Caz."

"You know about the bandolier," he said, voice shallow but steady. "Another one is you riding Nixus with me. It'd be easy to slide my hand under your cloak, my fingers curling into you to ride them."

Despite the situation, my face flushed, and heat gathered at the tops of my thighs.

"That's a good one. What's another one?"

There weren't any more remains scattered along the trees, and I almost cried. We were out of their territory, though it didn't ensure safety. The tree line broke up ahead and water sounded.

"Another one," he said between pants, his eyes closed as I guided him along the trail. "I really like this one." He paused and I focused on getting us closer to the water.

"Caz?" I nudged him and he jerked against me.

"I like it when you call me that." He sighed. "I really want to put you in my bed—my actual bed—and kiss every part of you until you're begging. Then I'd lick you, over and over, and make you come so many times you forget your own name."

Sunlight reflected off of the water and I gathered my reserves. Cazien grew heavier by the minute. "You talk a big game. Think you can live up to it?"

He laughed, a fraction of the energy it should be. "I promise, darling, I most certainly can for you."

We reached the creek, nearly large enough to be a shallow river. Scanning the shore, I guided us towards a rockfall and downed trees. It created a natural shelter and was high enough from the shore that even with a storm, we'd stay dry.

I eased him down, letting him lean against the rock towards the back. I dug out the medical kit and began to untie the makeshift bandages.

They'd soaked through with blood and by the time I cut Cazien's tunic away, my hands were covered in it.

"Should have a flask in there."

I looked up at Cazien, his eyes squeezed tight as his head slumped back. I upended his bag, not caring as things tumbled out. I grabbed the silver flask, unscrewed the lid and helped him drink a few swallows, before splashing more on the needle I'd threaded.

"Brace yourself." It was all the warning I gave before I poured whiskey on the open wound. If it had been any deeper, the Kanoi would have gutted him. Cazien cried out harshly, shoving his head back into the rock but he didn't

move. His chest heaved, and the blood mixed with the liquor as it soaked into his shirt. "Give me the flask."

I shoved it into his hand and guided his other arm over his chest, so I had room to work.

"Keep talking to me," I ordered as I steadied myself. If I didn't get the wound stitched, he'd bleed out.

He grunted as I pinched the filleted flesh together and began to stich.

"At least I can say—fuck—you're the prettiest person to ever stitch me up."

"Flatterer." His teasing gave me hope that he'd make it through the next hour.

"Really," he drawled. "You're the only one whose hands have been covered in my blood that I want to sleep with."

"So charming." I moved down the wound. It was so long, nearly the length of my forearm. He needed a professional medic. I forced the thought away. We'd deal with that later.

He hummed. "Morgan would definitely love you."

"I'll make you a bargain then." I tightened another stitch. There was noticeably less blood. "Once we get the relic and are off this island, I'll let you introduce me to her."

He laughed, half gasping. "My family will die of shock that I've brought a woman home to introduce to them."

I frowned at his side. I had less than an inch to go. "I'm not that bad."

"Not you," he breathed out and raised his hand weakly in a gesture. "Me. After everything with Nuria."

I didn't respond. I'd betrayed him like she had but he hadn't been able to kill me. And now I was fighting against time for his life.

He took another sip of whiskey as I finished up. I slathered ointment over the wound, hoping the whiskey had killed anything that could infect it. Then with the last clean strip of shirt, I bound it again.

"I'm going to get cleaned up and get a fire going." I hesitated to leave him but I wouldn't be going far. "Yell if you need something."

He grunted, not moving otherwise.

I watched him for another moment before rushing to the river. I scrubbed my hands clean of his blood in the numbing water, and then gathered kindling and wood for a fire. There wasn't room for the tent, and I doubted I could get him into it if I put it up. I laid out the bedroll instead, guiding him down, and cursed when I felt his brow.

Cazien was developing a fever.

I took a few moments to prepare myself for the next few hours and then filled every water container we had with the mountain water. I sat next to him, shifting him until his head was pillowled on my uninjured thigh.

Cazien sighed as I brushed his forehead with the cool, wet cloth. He opened his eyes, fever-bright, and offered me a smile.

"Your turn to talk, darling." His eyes had closed before he'd finished speaking.

I poured more water on the cloth. "What do you want me to talk about?"

"Tell me everything you like about me."

I smiled down at him. "You're such an asshole."

"That's one thing."

I hummed in thought, running the wet rag over his face and cleaning the blood from it. The bruise I'd given him when I'd punched him was nearly gone.

"I love that you care so much," I said. He made a sound as if to protest and I shook my head. "You do, Cazien. You think you're a monster, but a monster wouldn't try this hard to save his brother."

The sun had slowly crawled across the sky, and it was past midday. The forest had come alive around us, the sounds a security blanket against the Kanoi.

"I love that you call me darling," I murmured. I didn't think he'd heard me, but the side of his lip lifted up in response. I laid the cloth, newly soaked, across his forehead and ran my fingers through his hair. Tears lined my eyes, and I looked upwards, blinking fast.

"I love watching you fight. I love how you respect my skills, and trust in them despite me being a woman. I loved how you didn't expect me to be a plaything as well as a guide. You can be funny when you're relaxed. And I shouldn't, but I really love it when you get all growly. I love that you've never coddled me."

Cazien's breathing was even, and new tears appeared. I let them trickle down this time as I kept running my hands through his dark hair. I eased him off of my lap and sat on my knees beside him. The bandage was bloody, but the bleeding had drastically slowed, maybe even stopped by then.

I pulled the cloth off of his forehead, the cold replaced by his fevered heat. I wet it with the last of the water. I pressed a kiss to his forehead.

"Most of all, I love you," I whispered.

I pulled back, replacing the cold cloth, and sent prayers to any god or goddess listening that he'd make it through the fever until we could get him better help.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



**I** never managed to fall asleep, dozing before jerking awake and needing to check Cazien's breathing. I refreshed the cool rag often, considering at one point of even dragging him into the river.

By midmorning, I had to make a decision. I knelt at Cazien's side, pulling down the cloak I'd laid over him and carefully tugging at the bandage. It was soaked through with blood from his uneasy sleep.

Hissing at the sight, I pulled the bandage down to inspect the wound. It was red and swollen; I cursed.

I pulled out the map, tracing my fingers over the trail. We'd made it through the Kanoi territory and were only two easy days from the limestone cavern.

The main trail, the one Durnth followed, curved around to eventually let our trail join, like a tributary. Which meant there was a good chance at finding a village near the intersection.

I knelt beside him, running my hand over Cazien's cheek. He hardly moved. He wasn't ashen any longer, but the red fever was as worrisome.

"Cazien." He didn't respond. "I have to go find help." I bit my lower lip hard as there was still no reaction. I pressed a kiss against his sweaty forehead. "I'll come back. Even if I can't find anyone, I'll come back."

I put a fresh cool cloth on his forehead and put another bottle of purified water next to him, in case he roused enough to drink. I couldn't look back as I strode away, my pace devouring distance between the river and the main trail.

Sweat made my shirt cling to my back, every muscle aching from the fight and then terrible sleep. My thigh had a bruise along the entire side of it, and every step made my teeth grit.

I jogged, wishing running was possible. I'd left everything behind, except what I wore and my long dagger. I'd be screwed if I had to fight off another Kanoi attack.

I pushed on, past the aching burning sensations in my thighs, the hot scratch in my lungs. If I stopped moving forward, I'd collapse, and I couldn't do that until I found someone to help Cazien.

Exhaustion and determination barred thoughts from my mind. My world narrowed to the narrow trail, watching for roots or fallen trees. Even as the trees thinned out, I focused on the few feet ahead of me.

A call, definitely from a man, jerked me out of my staring contest with the island ground. I pressed against the ache in my side, my mouth dry and hot, as I staggered towards him and a woman.

Their faces were filled with caution, and who could blame them?

"Please," I gasped out. "I need help." I stumbled and fell to my knees a body length away from them. The man's eyes were suspicious, so I focused on the woman behind him. "He's hurt. The Kanoi—" she gasped and he took a step back, staring behind me in horror—"they attacked. We survived. He's got a fever." I dropped to my hands, head hanging, heaving.

They didn't say anything, and my throat constricted, too dehydrated to cry. I willed my head up, my body weak. They could slit my throat without effort.

"Please," I rasped. "We can pay. The Kanoi are dead."

The man looked back at the woman in question, and she huffed, pushing him aside. She cupped my face, eyes the color of topaz boring into mine. My head swam but she didn't let go, I couldn't look away.

She finally did, turning to the man. "She's telling the truth." Her voice was harsh, like worn aged rope, dry and frayed. "Her man's up the trail by the river. Get Nail and Preeti to help you bring him to my hut."

The man hesitated for a moment, and the woman glared.

"Yes, elder." He took off, running along the trail I was headed down. The woman, an elder, hooked her arm under my shoulder and hauled me up, letting me use her as Cazien had used me.

"How"—I coughed, damn I was thirsty—"did you know where he is?"

"I'm a witch."

She stated it as such a matter of fact that I snorted. It made the man listening to her, and calling her elder, make sense. Witches, real ones, aged slower. The woman,

someone I'd thought not much older than me, could be twice my age if not more.

But it also filled my weary body with relief.

"You can heal him then?"

She nodded, guiding me around a half-buried rock. "You must tell me everything of the fight with the Kanoi."

We were closer to the village than I realized, as the man and who I assumed were Nail and Preeti ran by us, two long branches with canvas stretched between them, back down towards Cazien. I watched until they disappeared.

"He still lives." I turned back to the witch. "He will live long enough to make it to my care. You did well, leaving him when you did."

We kept walking, the village appearing out of the jungle like a veil had been lifted. There were at least three times the huts than Sanaty's village, with children running around a center clearing. They stopped, going to their families seated in circles as we approached. There was no strength to offer a smile.

The witch spoke in a different language—something familiar but out of reach—and they relaxed. A few of the men and women rose, shuffling along the children, and the others returned to their tasks.

"This is my hut. You will rest here, as well as your man."

"His name is Cazien."

Her hut was more eclectic than Sanaty's had been—larger too. The front room featured the kitchen and central fire, as was custom, and there was a loft up above the central room. This hut had two doors off of the main room, both of them closed with a proper door. She guided me into

the leftmost one, which was revealed to be a witch's workroom, though there were two cots along the wall, empty with no bedding.

"Sit." She pointed to one of the cots, letting go of me. I dropped unceremoniously to the cot, the woven fabric groaning under me. She grabbed my chin, lifting my head up, not unkindly. Again she stared at me as if looking through me, and now that I knew she was a witch, I could almost feel her power. She gave a hump of satisfaction.

"You'll recover with a good night's rest and a solid meal in your stomach." She let go of me, and went to her worktable across the room. Soon, the scent of crisp mint tea cut through the petrichor of the workroom.

"What's your name?" I gratefully accepted the cup as I asked.

"I am Elder Corwyn." She went back to her worktable. "Tell me about the Kanoi."

I sipped at the mint tea, my exhaustion rushing from me as the warmth settled in my stomach. There didn't seem to be anything odd with the tea, but it'd never affected me like this. I took another sip, grateful to be able to rest.

"We had to cut through their territory," I began, weighing what to tell her. "They'd started tracking us the night before yesterday. We tried to lose them, but they were tracking my cycle."

She hummed and continued to pull items from her shelves. The entire wall around the worktable was shelved with clay pots or bushels of herbs. One entire shelf was dedicated to bowls, another to pestles. Now that I had the energy, I took in more of the room.

It was both a workroom, and an infirmary, to my surprise. Beside my cot was a small table supplied with clean bandages and ointment pots. Corwyn forewent the traditional wrap dresses of Aeaea, opting instead for a one-shouldered tunic that fell to mid-thigh and trousers. If the tunic had fallen to her ankles, it wouldn't have been out of place among the noblewomen of Grotto, though hers lacked the metal decorative brooch pinned at the shoulder.

Instead, she wore a simple black tie, a sprig of sage and mint bound against the cloth. Her hair, a dark brown, was piled on top of her head in an effort to keep it out of her face, but several strands had fallen out and floated down her back. She worked while listening, already knowing what Cazien might need.

"There were seven of them. We didn't know what tribe of Kanoi they were until the markers. When they attacked, they had clubs with spikes—"

"Were either of you struck by the spikes?"

"I don't think so," I answered after a moment. "I was hit on the thigh by a club, and I have a bruise to rival plums, but I'm fairly certain the spikes missed me. As for Cazien, the ones who focused on him had blades."

Corwyn turned and gestured for my tea cup, which I'd drunk entirely without notice. She refilled it before tipping a few drops of a sour green-colored tonic into it. "Drink all of it," she instructed. "In case you have some of the poison working through you. Those half-fae use eucalyptus wood for the spikes. It won't kill you, not right away, but it may be why you're exhausted. Slows the body and mind down."

I gulped the tea down, ignoring the heat.

"So Cazien was struck by a blade?"

I set the empty cup on the bandage table beside me, nodding. "On his side, deep enough to bleed like a gutted pig, but everything stayed inside." I shuddered, glad I hadn't needed to push anything vital back in. "I knew he needed more help than I could provide. I washed it with whiskey before sewing it up and smothering the heal-all ointment on it. It still got infected though."

"Wounds out here fester quickly." She studied the shelves in front of her. "He is taken by the fever, and I will perhaps need to reopen the wound to cleanse it."

I leaned forward, gripping my knees. "Can you save him, though?" Damn the treasure, damn Durnth, and even damn his brother. None of it mattered if Cazien died from infection.

"If he has the will to live," Corwyn answered.

A clatter from the other room had us both turning to see the men carrying Cazien in on the stretcher. They eased him onto the other cot under her direction before shooing them from the workroom and demanding not to be bothered unless it was another emergency. She snapped her fingers at me and I rose, the tea having returned some of my strength.

"Help me undress him."

Together we pulled off his clothes, and my fear threatened to return. Cazien's sun-kissed skin burned with heat. Only his scars weren't the color of a blazing sunset. He'd stopped sweating, the infection taking everything from him.

"Wipe him down."

I took the bowl and cloth Corwyn shoved at me and began at his face while she knelt close to the swollen and pus-filled wound. The bleeding had stopped, but it was so swollen, the stiches strained to hold the flesh together.

"It isn't pretty," the witch muttered. "But it looks much worse than it is. Another day or two, though, and the infection would have made it into his blood."

"Is it poison?" The water was cool and smelled of bitter herbs. It sank into his skin as I wiped it down his broad chest. He breathed shallowly, as if a weight pressed down against his chest. He still hadn't opened his eyes.

"Only an organic kind." She seemed satisfied by that. "The half-fae aren't known for keeping their weapons clean. You keep wiping him down. I'll need to reopen this and clean it from the inside out. You're not queasy, I take it?"

I swallowed hard. "So long as his insides stay inside, I'll be fine."

I focused on the task at hand, sending up prayers to Prospero that Corwyn was right and she could heal him. When the bowl was empty, she pointed to the pitcher on the worktable to refill. By the time my bowl was empty for the last time, Cazien's skin had cooled.

I breathed through my mouth as Corwyn cleaned out the wound. At times, Cazien would flinch, but otherwise he remained still.

I held his hand, resting on the side of his cot, as Corwyn began dragging a carved wooden rod within the wound, whispering an incantation.

Back and forth, the witch ran the rod over the wound, sealing it together. As it closed, Cazien's body grew lax and

he breathed easier. When she was done, the wound was no longer an angry, swollen thing but a thick red line, as if it'd been healed for a week.

Corwyn sat back, more of her dark hair hanging limp around her shoulders. There was a crease between her eyes, but she looked satisfied. "It'll scar. But from the looks of it, he won't mind another one."

She studied me, looking at where I held his hand and at the man between us. He was sleeping now, no longer unconscious.

"Do you know of the darkness inside him?"

I looked at Cazien, rubbing circles on the back of his palm, his callused fingers rough against my own.

"I've seen signs of it," I admitted at last.

"It helped keep him alive." My head snapped towards her at that. "Darkness like that does not like to give up life, even as little as he carries on his soul."

"He's a good man," I whispered. "Even if he doesn't believe it."

She said nothing and moved to clean up the workroom. She didn't request help, nor did I offer it. All I could do was watch Cazien, waiting for any sign of waking.

When I struggled to keep my eyes open, I eased down against him, squeezing into the narrow space between his body and the edge of the cot.

Warm spice, sage, and his own gentle musk settled over me, all tension leaking from my body. His heartbeat was strong under my hand, his chest rising and falling steadily. When Corwyn left us, the door closing with a quiet click, the

room was lit only by the single window on the wall above us. I let the tears come, then. Quiet but exhausting.

They weren't only for Cazien, and how close he'd come to death. They weren't only for how exhausted and sore I was.

I cried for everything that I gained and lost on this island. My family, my sense of security, my childhood. My dreams were torn away and twisted into survival. This trip ripped open the old wounds I'd thought long healed.

Cazien had ripped them open when he made me think about what it was to want more than surviving one day to the next. He'd put thoughts of a real life in my heart the moment he kissed me on that damn ship.

What was most terrifying was how close I'd come to losing that hope again. If Cazien had died, that hope would have died with it—this time leaving nothing behind to be rekindled.

When the tears were done, a hole had formed inside of me. It wasn't painful or bleak. It was waiting, eager for possibilities. It wanted to be filled with life—I wanted to be filled with life.

He'd been right when he'd said going across the Great Sea was running away.

Cazien shifted. A soft rumble came from him and I propped myself up on an elbow, my other hand still over his heart.

His eyelashes fluttered, dark and long against his cheeks, before they opened. His blue eyes were fogged, still in the space between sleep and consciousness. When they

focused on me, there was no fever-induced brightness to them. He blinked once, twice, before opening his mouth.

“I’d fight another demon if it meant getting some water. Or whiskey. Whiskey is preferred.”

I laughed, quiet but filled with relief, and carefully rolled off the cot onto my feet. “You’re so damn dramatic.” Still, I went to the other pitcher Corwyn had told me about and poured us both cups of water. I handed him one and went back to bring the pitcher with me. In a few moments, he’d drained the water and so I refilled it.

He glanced around, taking in the room.

“We’re safe,” I assured him. “You—your wound got infected. But Corwyn, an elder here, is a witch.”

He slumped back from where he’d half risen. “That explains a lot.”

I made to sit on the other cot, but he shifted over, snagging my fingers with his own. Without protest, I resumed my previous position, curled against him, my leg tangled between his.

He tilted his head, a serious look on his face, and I stilled. “I know you can’t get enough of me, but why, precisely, am I naked?”

Again I let out a short laugh, but then grew serious. “The fever was bad. While Corwyn worked on the wound, I had to take a cloth to you to help fight the fever.”

“Shame I didn’t wake up. I’d have a choice suggestion on which parts of me you focused on.”

I thumped him on the chest. “How is it you were about to meet Prospero, and you’re infuriating the moment you wake up?”

He pressed a kiss to the top of my head, his arm squeezing around my shoulders. "It's a part of my natural charm." He yawned and I mirrored him, then rested against his shoulder, where my thoughts took over again.

I'd thought he'd fallen asleep again when he spoke, hardly more than a rumble under my ear.

"I can hear you thinking."

I blushed. "Sorry."

"Don't be," he said. "Tell me?" I sighed, reluctant. "I'll tell you something I'm thinking."

I chewed on my lower lip, distracting myself by running my fingers through his chest hair. He waited patiently, his arm holding me. I didn't feel trapped in his embrace, not like I did when others tried to hold me.

"I don't want to run away anymore," I whispered at last.

He didn't respond right away and when he didn't reply, I nudged his leg with my knee. "Your turn."

His stomach tensed, putting his muscles there on display, as he moved his arm carefully over his still tender wound. He held my chin between thumb and finger, tilting me to look up at him.

The color had returned to his face, free of his dark hair save a single lock falling across his cheek. His storm-blue eyes made every thought of mine pause. Once again, I was the rabbit cornered by the fox.

"I'm thinking about what you said while you talked to me. And I'm wondering if it was real, or if it was the fever."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



**W**ith how hot my face was, I might have taken his fever inside of me. I knew exactly what he was talking about, and I wouldn't have said it if I knew he'd remember—if he heard it at all.

It's one thing to confess your love to a nearly comatose person. It's another thing entirely to confess it to someone looking right at you. The same someone you'd betrayed almost a week prior.

"Don't run away, darling." Cazien's voice was the softest I'd ever heard it. Gentle, but every part of him touching me was tense. A flash of fear in his eyes as I stayed silent made it clear.

He was as afraid of the answer as I was.

I could pass it off as a fever dream and save us both from stepping over that invisible line into the unknown.

The idea of lying to him made my skin feel coated in rancid oil, my mind revolting at the idea. No more running away.

His grip on my chin had weakened, as if he were a heartbeat from pulling away. I stretched up towards him,

pressing my lips to his own. His arm tightened around my shoulders and my fingers curled against his chest.

I tried to pour everything I'd felt in the last twenty-four hours into that kiss, as chaste as it was.

Pulling away, the kiss had given me courage. "It wasn't a fever dream, Cazien."

"Tell me again." His order was hoarse.

I ran fingers over his cheek, marveling at his brutish beauty. His sharp jaw rasped against my fingers with days of stubble, his hair wild around him. Even barely recovered from a mortal infection, he was the most beautiful man I'd ever seen. I looked back into those eyes, bright and demanding.

"I love you," I stated. I didn't shy away, I didn't whisper, I didn't hide from the words. I said them as certainly as I struck with a blade.

He crushed me to him, devouring my mouth and holding nothing back. I met him, kiss for kiss, touch for touch.

When we broke apart at last, I laughed. After a moment, he joined me, our quiet laughter fueled by ridiculous joy.

He kissed my cheek before settling me more on top of him, my head tucked under his chin. "I think I started to fall in love with you the moment you threw that dagger between my legs. When I told Gavret about it, he warned me to be careful."

"He's protective of you."

"All of us are," he said, his knuckles running up and down my back. "We only have each other, really, my brothers and sister."

"You really love them, don't you?"

He kissed the top of my forehead, and my heart fluttered. This is what I'd dreamt of as a child, before everything changed. I dreamt of finding someone who made me feel like this.

"I do. There's nothing I wouldn't do for them." He let out a huff. "Don't get me wrong. Sometimes I do want to murder them. Even Morgan at times."

"Tell me about them?"

I never had a sibling, nor any friends close enough to consider them as family. Durnth certainly wasn't a father figure to me, and none of the Hallows considered the gang a family. It was an occupation, a livelihood. I listened as he told me about each of his siblings.

How the king's court had dubbed Brannen the Duke of Blood, and how he'd drowned himself in wine and women to run from the grief of losing Viridian. His voice was fond of Morgan, his little sister who demanded to keep up with her brothers, even training with the sword until her mother forbade it publicly. So she trained in secret, to their mother's relief.

She'd never fought in combat, to Cazien's knowledge, but he was glad she could defend herself.

"And she hasn't been gifted with a name?"

He hummed. "Each of us has earned ours in combat. If I had to name her something, it would be the Raptor. She soars above us men, diving in to rake her talons across us when we least expect it."

I grinned. "I like her already. Did Viridian have a name, before he was taken into the fae realm?"

He shook his head, I felt it more than saw it, and let out a sigh. "He'd only been on a few campaigns with our father and Brannen at that point. With how skilled he was at the sword; I wouldn't have been surprised if he'd earned one the first time he charged. But he never threw himself into the fight like the rest of us. He always treated it as a chore, something he could do very well but found no satisfaction in."

"I'm sure that didn't endear him to your father?"

"My father only cared if we were willing and skilled enough to wet our swords with blood."

His words were tainted with old pain, and I pressed a kiss to his bare skin under me. Exhaustion was catching up to both of us, and I rolled, twisting oddly to snag a blanket from the neat stack I'd noticed under the bandage table.

"You're wearing too many clothes to sleep," he flirted, despite the weariness that had crept into his voice.

I settled the blanket around both of us, pulling it halfway up his chest. "If I take off my clothes, we won't be sleeping. And you aren't fully healed. We both need to rest."

My head rose and fell as Cazien sighed dramatically. He didn't argue, though, and wrapped both arms around me, as if afraid I'd slip away and this would have all been a fever dream. It didn't take long for either of us to fall asleep.

When we woke up again, my mouth was dry and tacky. I blinked, the light softer than when we'd fallen asleep.

A knock, and then the door opening had me turning towards the newcomer and I almost fell from the cot.

"Good morning," Corwyn greeted cheerfully. "I suggest if you're feeling hungry, that you get up and out of that

narrow bed. If you two hadn't taken the sleeping tonic, I doubt you'd have slept well at all."

I sat up at the edge of the bed, Cazien groaning as our voices pulled him from sleep. "Sleeping tonic?"

She nodded, moving around to Cazien's injured side as he sat up, the blanket falling to his lap. "In the water pitcher. You both needed it. Now, let me look at my work, young man."

I had to bite my lip to stop the laugh at Cazien's expression from being called a young man. Indeed, Corwyn looked around his own age. Like he could feel my amusement at his expense, he glared at me.

She prodded the wound, making him look back down at it. "It'll need a few more days to be properly healed. You'll stay here until then so I can keep an eye on it."

"We can't," he gruffed out, looking around. I grabbed his pack; one of the men who retrieved him must have repacked it. I tossed it to him and he dug out new clothes.

Corwyn stood, her arms crossed. "Yes, you can. I'll not have a patient of mine collapse in the jungle and feed those lynxes. It'll be a waste of magic."

Cazien pulled on his pants, unashamed of being nude in front of the witch, as he continued to dress. "I thank you for the healing, elder witch, and I'm happy to pay for the service. But time is not our ally right now."

She scoffed and I spoke up as Cazien pulled on a tunic, hoping to stop an argument.

"He's right." Corwyn looked at me wide-eyed. I shrugged. "We must make it to our destination before an enemy does. Otherwise, our entire journey is a waste."

She raised an eyebrow, looking between us. None of her hair had escaped the pile she'd built on top of her head. "Where are you going—and don't think of lying to me. I can See if I must."

I glanced at Cazien. It was his story to tell.

"To the desolation." His tone was clipped as he buckled his belt. "We know the location of the lost treasure and there is a relic of vital importance I must retrieve."

The witch looked at him, a blank expression on her face. Then she laughed, but when Cazien met her expression with a stone façade, she swore. She turned to me.

"You're serious? You seek Xanu's treasure?"

"Only one piece from it. A relic, for a giant."

"Why—"

"To save my brother from the giant king," Cazien interrupted. "It's the only way to free him from the fae realm before his seven years is up. Another witch told me."

She shook her head, clearly thinking us fools. "The legends are true, you know. I can feel Xanu's curse from here. Many have perished looking for that warlock's treasure, and he's only added souls to his army."

I glanced at Cazien. "Warlock?"

"How do you think he won so much treasure?" She shook her head again. "I won't set foot in the desolation. It's his magic that keeps life from growing there."

"I won't give up, if that's what you're trying to do." Cazien crossed his arms, matching the witch glare for glare.

She stepped right up to him, her head tilting back yet she seemed to dwarf everything in the room. Cazien's

nostrils flared and his eyes shuttered with blackness.

“You have the scorch of a demon on you.”

“From the one I faced and defeated.” He squared his shoulders, and the brutal side of him faced down the witch in front of him.

“Xanu will want you for his champion, boy. The moment you step into those canyons, you’ll be fighting for your soul as well as your relic.”

Cazien said nothing, his face stone.

“Is there a way to protect him? To help cloak us from the curse?” I asked, needing to be the voice of reason. I wouldn’t ask him to give up, but I’d be damned if we walked in there unprotected now that we knew of more dangers.

“There is a charm I can make.” She stepped away from him. “It doesn’t come cheap.”

Cazien grunted. “We can pay.”

She curled her lip at him. “Not in coin, boy. This is old magic. I can’t even tell you the cost it will demand.” Corwyn stalked to her worktable, waving us away. “There is food in the front. Then, since you’re insistent on this foolish quest, find Rower. She’s got a few ponies left over from the spring market.”

I reached for Cazien’s hand, tugging him away and grabbing our packs before he could argue more with the witch. He resisted for a moment before falling in behind me, taking his pack from my arm.

The food was exactly where she left it, and my stomach rumbled. I could smell the turmeric, garlic, and fresh basil along with the roasted lamb. Around it all was wrapped flat bread, and Cazien and I both devoured ours in silence, only

pausing for gulps of mint tea or to drizzle more tangy yogurt onto the wraps.

"I need to learn how to make that," Cazien declared after finishing his second cup of mint tea.

I raised an eyebrow. "You cook?"

He reached over and flicked my nose, making me yelp and jump back. "I can indeed cook. I don't care to always find an inn or tavern for meals, or eathardtack. Gavret is passable at cooking, but out of all of us, I'm the best cook."

He stood, wiping his hands on his thighs and taking the empty cups back to the kitchen area. I took the hand he offered, and rose, offering the last two bites of my wrap to him. He took it without question, wolfing it down with a groan of pleasure that had heat going straight to my core. Images of him making that sound, his face between my legs or against my neck as he moved inside of me, sent my pulse racing.

"Let's go see about these ponies."

Right, ponies.

The grin he gave me over his shoulder as he left Corwyn's hut told me he knew exactly what I'd been thinking about.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



The ponies were exactly what we'd need to get through the limestone canyons quickly. They weren't pretty, not with their mottled brown coarse coats and their blocky short heads. They were squat and solid but built for the terrain we'd be crossing.

No one had touched Cazien's money pouch, not with the risk that I'd fail and he'd come raging back to the camp. The woman, Rower, had been skeptical about selling the two beasts. She'd stated plainly that she doubted we could afford it, and then her eyes boggled when Cazien named a price that was double what she would have gotten at the spring market.

She'd thrust the reins into our hands at that point, and a saddle and set of tack for both.

"You know you paid her the equivalent of what she made at the spring market this last year?" Corwyn trudged up to where we were fitting our packs onto the geldings backs. The witch's mood hadn't improved since the morning. She thrust her hand out, two pendants hanging from leather

cord. I took them, passing one to Cazien, and inspected the stone.

It could have been the inside of an oyster, with the waves of oily colors, but it felt like pomas. Impossibly light, but solid and smooth.

"How much do we owe you?" Cazien asked, tugging the pendant on over his neck and tucking it under his shirt. "For this as well as the healing?"

She pursed her lips, her hands on her hips. "It feels wrong to take a dead man's coin."

"We're not dead yet," I pointed out and put the necklace on, hiding it under my shirt like Cazien had. In my hand it had felt light, but wearing it weighed me down. The magic covered me, smothering me until no part of me was exposed.

"You'll get used to it." There was no amusement in her voice like yesterday. "The magic will demand a price. I can't tell you what it will be, or when it will demand it. If you are not willing to pay it, the magic will sink back into Aeaea." She turned to Cazien. "Half of whatever is left in your coin purse."

My eyebrows shot up but Cazien opened up the leather pouch and poured half of it into her waiting hands. It was more than we'd paid for the ponies. She put the coins in a clever pocket in her tunic and sighed. "If you would take advice from someone who is twice your age—"

"So long as you're not telling us to stop."

I wanted to kick Cazien. From Corwyn's look, she did too.

"Once you're close to the treasure, be careful what you trust. Xanu was a terrible, terrible man. Powerful, yes, but

very terrible. He slaughtered his crew and bound their souls to that treasure. His curse will not let go of a single item without a struggle."

I mounted the horse; Rower said he didn't have a name, which I thought was a shame. I looked at Corwyn, remembering the map and the message from Xanu. "Do you know what he might have meant when he said only those who live in darkness can find the treasure?"

She stilled, eyes darting between Cazien and me. "You do truly know where it is."

Cazien nodded. "The relic is the only chance for my brother's freedom. I will do what it takes to free him. Even if it means fighting a cursed army."

I looked at the witch, who still hadn't answered my question. She was studying Cazien. He didn't seem to care as he swung up into the saddle, looking comically large compared to the pony. The beast had to be two-thirds the size of Nixus. Whatever she found there, she didn't say as she turned to me.

"Xanu liked riddles." She fingered a pendant at her neck. "I would suggest you embrace the darkness, wherever you find yourself." She stepped closer, her hand going to my boot. "Watch him, Minerva. Where you are going, the darkness inside him will flourish. He will be fighting himself, as well as the curse. Keep him in the light."

I swallowed but nodded. "I'll do my best."

She moved to the head of the horse, holding its bridle, and pulled out a small topaz. With deft fingers, she tied the jewel so that it rested in the center of the pony's head. She did the same to Cazien's mount.

"These charms will allow the ponies to not tire. They will still go lame eventually, but the magic should hold for two days. Consider it a parting gift."

Cazien wheeled his mount around, eager to get going. I thanked Corwyn and followed close behind.

The pendant hung heavy around my neck, static pulsing out along my skin when it jostled. The magic felt deep, like an ancient forest where the shadows hid secrets. It tasted old and of lightning storms.

When it demanded its price for protection—would it be something I was willing to pay?

Cazien rode with purpose, his mind focused on the task ahead. Mindful of Corwyn's caution, we didn't push the ponies past a trot. It wasn't the most comfortable pace, but the distance was eaten up and we didn't stop until the sun was beginning to set.

We were close to the coast, the sounds of the ocean hitting the cliffs filtering in through the trees. The clearing I'd chosen was a short walk away, and when we'd brushed down the ponies and poured the grains in front of them, I grabbed Cazien's hand and guided him through the trees.

The Dark Sea spread out in front of us, the sun low against the horizon on our left. On our right, night had begun to stretch its dark tendrils, stars winking faintly in the dying sunlight.

We settled on the rocky ground, not quite at the edge. A cool breeze flowed up from the ocean, the endless whoosh of breaking waves blending perfectly with the sounds of the jungle waking up behind us for the night.

Neither of us spoke for a while as we passed a bottle of wine Cazien had procured somehow from the village. Beyond the wall, the Aeaeans preferred rice wine and each village made their own vintages. This one was sharp enough to make my mouth pucker, but then the warm and sweet citrus cut through, coating my tongue and throat and warming my stomach.

"How much longer?" Cazien took the wine bottle from me, taking a small sip after his question.

I pointed northwards along the coast. "If we keep the same pace we did today, we should get to the canyons after midday tomorrow. Then we need to find the specific cave to descend."

He nodded and passed me the wine bottle back.

"What are you going to do once we have the relic?"

He slung his arm over my shoulders, pulling me to his side. He was still recovering, but the wound was healed in the way that mattered. "I like that you said we," he murmured against my hair before kissing me there. "We'll return to the Talon Estate with Gavret. Brannen—he may or may not come. I think he's given up hope. But we've already found a portal to the fae realm. So we'll make our petition there."

I leaned my head on his shoulder, the brine of the ocean mixing with his spice and sage scent. I would never get enough of his scent. It was comfort and love and security and desire.

"And if the giant won't trade?"

He let out a long breath.

"I'm sorry, I shouldn't—"

"No," he stopped me. "I've considered the possibility. If the king refuses to trade the relic for Viridian's freedom then there isn't anything else we can do short of declaring war."

An image of Cazien facing off with a giant sent a shudder through me. It was quickly followed by the image of him being forced to fight Viridian.

"Brannen wouldn't sanction it," he said, unknowing of the relief his words sent through me. "And as much as I hate to say it, I can't say he's wrong. It would be a bloodbath and the odds of us freeing him would be incredibly low." Grief filled his words.

"Tell me more about him. Something happy?"

Cazien's hand rubbed along my arm as he thought. The sky continued to darken, the sun sinking below the horizon. The Dark Sea threw itself against the pillars of black rocks that circumnavigated the island before finally breaking against the cliff face.

It reminded me of when I'd sit in the gardens with my mother and father. They'd be sitting together, and I'd play with the toys my father had bought for me from beyond the wall. Or when winter settled over the island and I curled in my mother's lap as she told my father and me a story.

Content—that's what sitting here watching the ocean, being held against Cazien, made me feel.

"He loves pastries," Cazien said at last. I rested my hand on his thigh, a silent encouragement. He let out a short breath of laughter. "He was the baby, and so everyone doted on him. And he used it to his advantage. He'd sneak into the kitchens and pout until the cook or one of the

serving girls gave him one of the sweets they'd made that day. They never noticed when he swiped a few more for the rest of us. As talented as Viridian is with any form of combat, he's always been incredibly generous."

Cazien leaned more against me, settling into his memories of his youngest brother.

"You wouldn't guess it from looking at him. We've all mastered ourselves until we let nothing show that we don't want, but Viridian? It's strange. It's not as if he looks hard, or dangerous like Gavret or me."

He seemed to fumble for words, and I stroked his thigh, waiting.

"Viridian is like a steel trap. When you look at him, it's as if he is pulling you into him. He absorbs every look, every word, every gesture. I've only seen him explode twice, but..." he shuddered. "It was always in defense of someone, at least. I think that's why his loss hurts so damn much. He's the best of us."

I shifted and grabbed his chin, forcing him to look at me. "When will you accept that you're a good man, Cazien?"

"When will you accept that I'm really not, Minerva?" He pushed me to the ground, crawling over me with a dark grace that both thrilled me and set off a warning deep inside my mind. He pinned my wrists to the ground, and I might as well have been in iron shackles.

Cazien's head dipped, his nose grazing my neck and I turned my head, granting him more access.

"I have done so many dark things, darling," he whispered before pressing a kiss against my pulse point. I froze under him as he trapped my legs with his own and

scraped his teeth against my flesh. “Good men don’t enjoy the thrill of delivering death.” Another kiss, another wave of chills through me. “Good men have nightmares of the chaos they’ve endured.”

Cazien moved to the other side of my neck. My heart raced, my breath escaping me. I wanted to run from him. I wanted to stay.

“Good men don’t crave a good fight like others crave a good fuck. They don’t need the high that violence gives. They don’t want to feel that same violence when they’re between a woman’s legs.”

My eyes fluttered closed as his lips moved up over my jaw, teasing me but never kissing me.

“Good men certainly don’t fuck their fist, over and over, after meeting a gorgeous and violent woman.” His lips nipped at my own but he pulled away when I tried to deepen the kiss. “And a good man would never have taken that woman’s virginity, branding her as his.”

Cazien’s rough words were harsh against my skin, against my mind and even my heart. But they were the flint to the rock within me, shooting sparks every time they collided.

What electrified me was how little he touched me. His legs over mine, his fingers wrapped around my wrists, and his mouth so, so close to my own.

I wouldn’t be distracted though. “A monster wouldn’t risk his life for his brother.”

He stilled above me, and I opened my eyes.

Cazien was framed by the dying rays of sunset, the deep sapphire blue of night spilling across the sky behind him.

That light, those powerful last rays of daylight, found a home in the blue of his eyes. He was an untamed thing, a man with darkness inside of him—afraid of his own light.

“I see you, Cazien.” I wanted to wrap my arms around him, but his grip was adamant. “I see the darkness inside of you. The monster you hide behind. But I see the good, too. The good you refuse to believe in.”

His fingers loosened, and I slipped from his grasp, pushing him onto his back and straddling him. I didn’t pin him down. Instead I ran my hands along his chest and arms and back again, reveling in the strength underneath me.

“A bad man would have taken me into his bed.” I scooted down his legs, my hands going to his belt buckle. My desire spiked when I palmed him, drawing a moan from him. “A bad man would risk his crew’s life for greed.”

I stood, slipping out of my boots and easing my pants off. Cazien watched me with a pained hunger—a hunger for more than release. He sucked in a breath as I wrapped my fingers around him.

“A bad man would have taken more than a kiss.” I sank down onto him, his hands gripping my hips. I braced myself against his chest. “A bad man would never have settled for his fist.” I groaned as I began to move. “A bad man would never have shown a woman pleasure without demanding his own.”

We rocked together; our gazes locked. I coaxed his hands away, lacing mine through his, and kissed his knuckles.

“I couldn’t love a bad man,” I said, kissing his lips again.

One moment, I was riding him, holding his hands to me and the next, he was on top, burying himself deep within me. He worked an arm under my lower back, lifting my hips, and the other around my shoulders. At last, he kissed me.

Cazien's kisses were soft, inviting in a way that made me wrap my arms around his back and my legs around his. We rocked together, moving against each other, the opposite of the frenzied need we'd given into before.

The intimacy made me delirious. I held to him, rocking my hips with his as we let our pleasure simmer. When my climax happened, it took me by surprise. My moan came out as a whine, swallowed by Cazien's kisses. He looked at me, his eyes still shining with the rays of sunlight despite the night sky, and I let myself fall into him.

"I love you, Cazien," I said, and he dropped his head to my shoulder. I carded my fingers through his hair, releasing it from the leather tie. My mouth found his ear. "I love you," I said again, and his shudder rocked through me.

His hands slipped down to my hips, holding me as if I were a lifeline during a raging storm at sea.

"I love you."

His hips rocked harder into my own, but his pace never increased.

"I love you."

The shudder washed through him again, his hips snapping at the end of his thrust.

Over and over, I declared my love for him as he held me and rocked himself within me. I stroked his back, scratched his scalp lightly with my nails, as he worked us higher. I

didn't stop speaking, even as his body strained with need above me, his arms quivering and his legs braced against mine.

His breath was ragged and hot against my chest, and when pleasure washed over me in warm, gentle waves, his lips pressed against my neck, his hips grinding into me as he let me bring him along.

We lay there, silent and wrapped in one another, his face resting on my shoulder, as the moon climbed into the sky. Only when the ocean breeze grew too brisk did we finally pull away from each other, but not without trading slow kisses, meant to caress and not arouse.

When we settled into the bedrolls, we wrapped around each other again and Cazien gave himself over to sleep. His face had smoothed out, the shadows lighter under his eyes, as if we'd pushed his darkness back.

I stole this time, refusing to think about the next day. I had tallied the days since I'd left Durnth and, unless he experienced delays, we would be racing him through the canyons. I traced his stubble-covered jaw in the dark. In that moment, I knew I would pay any price to help him save his brother.

Whatever the magic asked of me tomorrow, I would give it.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



The desolation filled an entire valley between ridges. It stretched from halfway up the mountain all the way to the sea. On either side, the ridges were lined with lush green trees, but it was as if a god had drawn his blade down the peak of each ridge and ended the life there, the border was so astute.

In the valley itself, nothing grew. Limestone had emerged from the undergrowth when everything had died, and over time even the black rock from the volcano had disappeared. Nothing, according to legend, could endure in this valley.

And we were about to ride into it.

From above, it was difficult to gauge where Xanu's cave might be in the labyrinth of canyons before us. At least it would present the same difficulty to Durnth and the remainder of the men.

"Do you think it was Agni or Xanu who made it so this valley stays dead?" Cazien leaned forward, a forearm on the pommel, the reins held loose in his hand.

"Hard to say." I narrowed my eyes, gazing at the ridge across from us. "Even if Agni started it, Xanu made sure nothing could grow."

The king's curse pressed against me, the magic pendant a thin barrier between us. I didn't like not knowing what the price would be, or when the magic would require it. From the way Cazien rubbed at his chest, below the pendant, I guessed he felt the same.

Movement on the other ridge caught my eye again and I leaned forward.

"Dammit." I sat up, turning the pony back to the trail. "That's Durnth. We need to move."

We urged the ponies faster, the trail evening out as we neared the desolation.

"What do you remember of the map?" I called over my shoulder. The trail opened up enough for Cazien to move up alongside me.

"Enough to know that Durnth is closer to the cave than we are."

I grimaced. "That's what I thought too."

Relying on Corwyn's magic, I urged the pony faster. The press of the king's curse surrounded us, and the amulets were worth double what Cazien had paid. If the ponies felt the curse, they gave no sign, the magical gems fueling them onwards.

Cazien's face was twisted in anger.

"How are you feeling?"

When he looked at me, the veins of his eyes had turned black. The witch's words came rushing back. "Cazien?"

His jaw clenched, the muscle twitching. “I’m handling it. You?”

“I can feel the magic. It’s like it’s waiting for the charm Corwyn gave us to fail.” I shuddered.

Cazien grinned, though it was more like a baring of teeth. “At least Durnth won’t have protection.”

If I hadn’t separated Cazien, giving Durnth the altered map, we would be riding into the desolation unprotected. Cazien, and the scar left by the demon, would have felt the full effect of the magic in these canyons.

“We need to get into the canyons.” I guided the pony off of the trail, letting him slow his pace. Sweat darkened his hair but he showed no sign of tiring. “The cave was closer to the coast according to the map. You watch the left, I’ll watch the right.”

The sun was at its peak as we began our search for the cave. Sweat rolled down my forehead and neck. We had fresh water, but I drank from it sparingly. There was no water source here in these canyons.

The first two narrow canyons revealed nothing deeper than shallow pockets in the cliffsides. The sun continued to crawl across the azure sky, turning my skin pink.

“No sign of Durnth,” Cazien said, sipping his own water. His face was covered in the dust kicked up by the ponies, sweat tracks cutting through the grime. No doubt I was in a similar state.

I studied the canyon we were in. It was twice our height but provided very little shade from the brutal sun. The other canyons had been the same, only varying in height.

"Xanu set the curse here," I mused out loud. The pony shifted under me, eager to be on the move. The silence of the canyons was eerie. I wrapped my fingers around the pendant and concentrated on that barrier. Outside of it, the curse pressed against it, washing over it in waves. I turned the horse, ignoring Cazien's questioning eyebrow.

The waves of the curse came from a single direction.

"This way." I urged the pony down the canyon, taking the first offshoot to the left. Cazien spurred his mount to follow close behind.

I kept half of my focus on the magic, the other half on making sure I didn't fall from the saddle.

"We've got company," Cazien said with a growl.

Durnth and the men were farther down the canyon, spreading out to form a blockade. The magic pulsed from the right and ahead I could make out another turn.

"They've got crossbows," I reminded him. "We need to turn farther ahead, but we'll be in range then."

Cazien urged his mount faster, my own picking up its pace. They would never be a match for Nixus or Cian, but with the help of the charms on their bridles, we had a chance.

Durnth was ahead, right in the middle on one of the pack ponies, behind the line of men. From this distance, his scalp under his thinning hair was cherry red from the sun, and he knew exactly who we were. He began shouting as we raced forward, two of the men readying crossbows.

They fired the first volley too soon, both of the bolts burying themselves halfway up the shaft in the rocky ground.

We raced past, closer to the canyon. They'd follow, but we wouldn't be charging down the sights of crossbows at least. And Durnth was the only one on a horse.

"Almost there," I said over the pounding hooves of our mounts. The sound echoed off the canyon walls, reverberating around us. It sounded as if an entire herd of ponies charged towards the men, instead of two. The archers raised their crossbows again.

So close.

They fired. One went wide of Cazien. The other sliced through my upper sleeve, cutting into my arm before flying past. I hissed as the stinging pain throbbed up my arm.

Cazien growled, his eyes growing darker as he went to draw his blade.

"I'm fine," I assured him, not letting the pain show. I was fine; it did sting like a bitch though. "Stay with me, Caz."

He blinked rapidly, shoving the sword back down the few inches he'd drawn. His eyes lightened, but the darkness still lingered. It would linger until we escaped this place.

Durnth shouted orders and a few men raced towards us, swords or daggers held high. When they were a handful of yards away, we swerved to the right, disappearing down a canyon that hadn't been visible from their side.

We kept up the hard pace, putting as much distance between us and our pursuers as we could.

"We're getting close." The magic crashed against the protective shield with the frenzy of a hurricane.

"I can feel it," Cazien replied, his voice strained. His eyes were covered in a dark fog. It hadn't overtaken him yet, but he was struggling.

The pony reared, throwing me to the stony ground as it tripped over its own momentum. Cazien's mount did the same, but he had enough warning to control his fall. The ponies staggered to their feet, galloping back the way we came, their tails held high.

I rolled to my side, wincing at the pain in my knee. I'd landed on it, tearing through the fabric and skin.

Cazien was at my side. "Let me see." He didn't wait as he gripped my knee, feeling for any injury below the surface.

"It's not broken," I promised. "I can walk."

He looked at me and I could see the moment he considered telling me he'd go the rest of the way on his own. I grabbed his hand, squeezing it tight. "I'm with you. Let's go. It was the magic, I think, that set the horses off. I can practically taste it."

He nodded; his jaw clenched. He helped me stand, waiting as I tested my knee. It hurt, but I'd dealt with worse in the past.

Cazien's other hand was on the hilt of his sword, his shoulders tight and his feet set in a defensive position.

"Cazien."

No response.

I moved in front of him, never letting go of his hand. The fog in his eyes was growing darker. I kissed the hand I held. "Stay with me, Cazien. Don't let that demon win."

A heartbeat stretched into two, then into three, before his shoulders loosened and I could see the blue of his eyes again.

He swallowed hard. "Let's go." He didn't drop my hand.

We jogged along the canyon, the magic growing so thick we had to force our way through it as if crossing a river. Cazien's grip on my hand became crushing, but I refused to let go. I knew if I did, the darkness scarring his heart would overwhelm him and then Xanu's curse would strike.

"There," Cazien grunted the single word.

On the left side of the canyon, an opening sank into the earth. The magic radiated outwards, each step closer requiring more effort.

Every nerve screamed as we approached and then my pendant burned like a brand. Magic washed out from it, pausing time between heartbeats as it finally demanded its payment.

A memory rose up before me.

I ran from my father on the shores of Grotto, delight bubbling from my chest. My mother was near, and I raced towards her, seeking her protection. I dove into her arms, and she caught me, her head thrown back with laughter. Then my father wrapped his arms around the both of us, spilling us sideways into the sand. His fingers found my sides, tickling me mercilessly.

My mother retaliated on my behalf, and then she was chasing him. He ran towards the water, my mother on his heels. I followed as quickly as my short legs could as they splashed into the bay. The chase turned into a splashing war, all three of us breathless with laughter.

It was one of my favorite memories of my family.

And the magic required it as its price.

Panic seized me as I shied away from the loss. I had so few joyous memories of the three of us, each one more

precious than diamonds.

Cazien's hand still gripped mine, a hand that had never been known to be gentle. If I gave this memory to the magic, I would make it past the curse and we could save Viridian. More importantly, I would have the new life I'd been seeking. It wouldn't be across the Great Sea where no one knew me.

It would be with the man beside me. A future that would bring new memories.

My heartbeat continued as the magic protected me, taking the memory from my mind. I finished the step forward, the curse sliding off and around me, and into the cave. Cazien stepped with me, his eyes haunted.

"What did it ask for?" My voice was harsh, like my throat was made of the limestone surrounding us.

He gazed at the ground, his hand loose in mine. If I let go, his fingers would slip and I'd lose him. Cazien looked up, his eyes wet, and I squeezed his hand.

"It wanted the truth to a question." He sounded wrecked, as if whatever he'd told the magic shattered him.

I wrapped him in my arms, hugging tightly. He stiffened before his arms wrapped around me, returning the embrace with desperation.

"I don't know how they're going to get past the curse," I murmured into his shirt.

"I don't think they've gotten past it," Cazien said and I pulled away to look at him in question. He looked out beyond the entrance of the cave. "I think they've already been taken. Marked at least. I can feel it, the darkness out there."

I shuddered. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I’m really glad I lied to you and separated you from them.”

He snorted. “Me too.” He moved away, his fingers loosely hooked around mine. I would fight the dark for him as long as he needed. “There are torches here.” He kicked at the pale dust-covered pieces. “No telling how old they are.”

“I’ve got flint.” I pulled it from the bandolier. Cazien picked one up, knocking as much dust from it as he could. It took four strikes against the stone walls before the torch took enough sparks to flare into life. Cazien held it up in front of us as we walked deeper into the cave.

“Only those who live in darkness will find the treasure,” he repeated as the entrance grew farther away.

“I would think both of us have lived in darkness.” I couldn’t see anything beyond the light of the torch.

The tunnels were smooth, the sediment on the walls weaving and flowing like a river. This must have been one of the outlets of lava from Agni’s volcano. “The map showed the tunnels, but it never said where the treasure was. And it’s been so long, new tunnels could have been formed.”

“It’s a godsdamned maze.”

I chewed on my lip, halting. Cazien took a step ahead of me before feeling me tug his hand back. “We need to figure out the clue. Otherwise we’re going to get lost, and likely die in here.”

He snorted. “It’s hard to get lost when you don’t already know where you’re going.”

“I’m so glad the curse had no effect on your humor.”

“There is a lot it didn’t affect, darling.” Cazien winked and I rolled my eyes. I opened my mouth to speak, and he

held his finger to my lips, and I clamped it shut. My ears strained to hear anything beyond the crackle of the torch.

Laughter and boasts echoed down the tunnel towards us.

“Shit.” We said at the same time.

Cazien dragged me forward, and I hurried behind him. He swung the torch ahead of us, looking for any tunnel to divert down. He found one that descended down to the right, and as we were about to pass another tunnel, I pulled us into the new one.

“Put out the torch,” I hissed, and he dropped the torch, rolling it against the stone with his boot until not even embers remained.

He let go of my hand, sliding it along my back until he held me against him. He pressed us against the wall, and I was certain my heartbeat would echo and alert them to our location.

I breathed through my mouth, trying to be as quiet as possible. Were we far enough down the tunnel that if they came this way, they wouldn’t see us? What if Durnth sent men down this tunnel? Could Cazien keep the darkness at bay for long enough during a fight? If he couldn’t, could I pull him back?

We held each other, listening as the sounds of their voices grew closer.

“Still no sign of them, sir.”

Fucking Yaun. He was always ready to kiss Durnth’s boots.

The grunt must have come from Durnth because he spoke a moment later. He had to be close, his voice

sounding stronger than an echo.

"Hold the torch up and let me check the map." He'd discovered how to make the hidden trails appear on the map. "I wouldn't put it past that ungrateful bitch to be down here with Talon."

"Typical woman. Get a rich man between her legs and she'll turn against her own. She always did think she was better than us."

A low growl came from Cazien and I squeezed him tight. What Yaun said was insulting, but he could say I preferred to bathe in dung and fuck fae so long as they left without detecting us.

"Pity Talon kept her all to himself in the city. We could have taken turns above the stables. Get in our own rides, eh?"

Cazien pulled back, and his snarl was almost visible. I yanked him towards me, holding his face in my hands and bringing his forehead against mine. His hands went to my hips, digging in hard enough to leave bruises.

Fight it, I thought at him. Ignore it. They don't matter. What they say doesn't matter.

"We'll take this path. Then once we get low enough, start branching out," Durnth ordered, ignoring the men degrading me.

I kept my focus on Cazien, his face warm under my hands, my hips growing tender from his strength. The men spoke of their plans for the treasure, everything from spending a month in a brothel to buying an estate in another country. Durnth never said what he wanted to do with his share.

Their voices went past our tunnel, and neither Cazien nor I moved. I don't think we even breathed. They kept moving past us, only their voices and a brief flicker of light in the distance told us how close they'd come.

I gulped in a breath, settling my nerves. This was more intense than any job I'd worked before with Durnth. And the payoff would be so much better.

Cazien eased away from me a long time after their voices disappeared, and we made our way through the dark back towards the other tunnel. I stopped dead at the entrance of it, staring at the ceiling in awe.

"Agni's Blood," I whispered.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



“O nly those who live in darkness.” Cazien snorted.

The Agni’s Blood cast the tunnels in an iridescent glow. Bright enough that we could make out each other’s features, but still dim enough it would have been impossible to see with torch light. Like the cave with the warm springs, the Agni’s Blood required darkness to thrive and show its light to the world.

Unlike the warm springs, the entire tunnel wasn’t covered in it.

“It’s a trail.” I realized. “It’s marking the real path.”

“Maps would be useless down here.” Cazien circled slowly, taking in the glow. Reds, blues, yellows, and greens covered him. “Damned clever.”

I snagged his hand again, following the plants deeper into the island. My steps were lighter, concern replaced with confidence. So long as we avoided detection by the others, we could find the treasure. We wouldn’t be trapped down here forever.

The air grew cooler, and to our relief, drier. We'd been swimming in the humidity of the island for nearly two weeks. I'd come to love the dry air of Constinbul and Scrya in the decade I'd lived there.

"Do you think we're close?" I kept my voice to a whisper. The presence of magic had returned and I was small in front of it. If I spoke too loud, it might draw the attention of whatever lurked down here. Perhaps the army of souls Xanu had gathered to protect the treasure.

"If we are, then they are too." Cazien's voice was at my ear, his breath against me, and the sight he pointed to made me shudder. It was Yaun, the one who'd suggested the men take their turns with me. I crouched beside his body, turning him onto his back and recoiling.

Cazien's arms gripped me by the shoulders, steadying me.

"His eyes..."

They'd been burned out, streaks of ash and smoke rising over his forehead and dropping down his cheeks. His lips were twisted in a scream of agony, and his throat was bloody. Cazien toed the man's hand, moving it out of our shadow.

"Whatever got inside him, he was willing to claw out his own throat to get it out."

This is what we would have faced unprepared if we had not met Corwyn.

"Another soldier added to Xanu's ranks." I rose, my hand finding Cazien's again. "I refuse to let us join him."

I pulled us past the man. I'd known Yaun for years, but there was no grief in my heart for him. Especially not after

his foul suggestions. His body could rot down here, his soul trapped to wander these caves for eternity.

We continued to follow the Agni's Blood, which never deviated from a single course. It never doubted its path as it guided us deeper into the island.

"We're heading towards the coast," I whispered. The air was moist, faint traces of salt tickling my nose. Salt and something different, something sulfuric.

"Makes sense. It'd be easier to off-load ships if there was sea access."

If I'd been an ancient ruler with magic at my disposal, I wouldn't have bothered with hiding the treasure so well. What was the point of collecting treasure if you weren't going to use it? No one knew where Xanu ruled, only that he had been a king.

Aeaea never had a king, only ruled by a board of governors in Grotto. With only the single city, there'd been no need for an outright ruler.

The air was thick with brine now, dominating the sulfuric scent underneath.

"Where Sedus conquers the beasts of Agni." I turned to Cazien. "The treasure is where the sea meets the lava from the volcano."

Cazien's face bloomed into a wicked grin of satisfaction.  
"Clever girl."

We pushed on, exhaustion and concern about Durnth pushed away in our excitement. It took another ten minutes before we heard the sound of the ocean. Another few minutes before we turned a corner and were met with a

cavernous space separated in two by a channel of churning seawater.

The Agni's Blood spread out over the ceiling, illuminating the other side in prismatic colors, amplified by molten rock flowing down the sides like walls of living flame.

It all surrounded a breath-stealing amount of treasure. It had been organized at one point in time, as evidenced by the separation of loose jewels, coins, jewelry, and other treasured pieces worth fortunes in their own rights.

"How well can you swim?"

Cazien studied the stretch of water in our way. It slapped against the far wall, and I gripped his arm, my eyes wide. "Look." I pointed.

He swore as he saw what I did. The frigid seawater hissed against the black wall. Cracks formed in the wall, glowing a bright red before the water hardened it into stone. New angry tears ripped open, the water cooling those next. Over and over, while the tide was high.

"Xanu must have spelled the channel to never let the lava seal it and bar the way to the treasure." It was the only thing that made sense. "And when the tide recedes—"

"The lava will flow, making it impossible to cross until the next tide."

"That water is brutal." I watched it race towards the back of the cavern with the intensity of charging cavalry. "There will be no surviving if one of us is thrown against that wall."

I could swim, but I'd never tested myself against this wild of current. I walked along the edge, peering down, but

without more light, it was impossible to guess how deep it was. When I reached the opening the water poured from, there was a shape along the dark wall, near my knee. Crouching, I didn't hear Cazien approach over the roar of the water.

The tide reminded me of an angry beast, something that only lived in the fae world and sought to destroy everything in its path. It sounded like the rage of a god. "It's a rope." I tested its slack, but even that gentle touch had it falling from the rock, worn through with age, and tossing in the water.

"It means it might be shallow enough to cross on foot." Cazien eased past me, lying flat on his belly against the charred ground. The ground was uneven here, small piles of rock reaching upwards, as if tossed there by the flowing lava and hardening immediately. They crumbled easily underfoot and lying on them couldn't be comfortable. I kept an eye on the entrance. We needed a plan.

"I can't reach the bottom," Cazien said, pulling his now soaked arm from the water. "But I think I was close. Do you trust me?"

A protest of his clear plan leapt to my lips, but I pushed them away. We needed to get across, and this was another risk of many.

"I do."

Cazien's face softened as it had when I'd confessed my love. He took my hand again and pulled me close enough that I could see the black was nearly banished from his eyes.

"For luck." He dipped his head and kissed me. My hands went to his hair, pulling until he deepened the kiss. We broke apart too soon, but the tide did not wait.

Cazien sat at the edge, his long legs disappearing into the water. If he were right about the depth, he should be able to stand. Crossing would be another matter, something that the rope had assisted Xanu and his men with.

Lower lip caught between my teeth, I gripped his forearm with both hands as I crouched beside him. If the current overpowered him, I'd be able to hold him and help haul him out. My stomach churned worse than the water. This danger was different than fighting the Kanoi. With the half-fae, there was a clear enemy, a predictability in the way they fought.

The ocean's tide was a force of nature powered by the grudge of a god. It was a beast, that once it had you in its grips, it wouldn't let you go.

Cazien gripped the rock wall with his other hand, his entire body straining against the strength of the tide. I knew the moment his feet touched the bottom, and my knees were weak with relief. The water only came to the middle of his stomach. Which meant it would almost reach my chest.

He looked back at me. "We can cross, if we're careful." He twisted his arm until his fingers clamped around my forearm while still letting me hold tight to his. I eased into the water, faster than I'd preferred, but already red veins in the far wall appeared more frequently.

I sank into the water, Cazien's and my hold the only thing keeping me from being dragged to that wall of barely

contained molten rock.

The cold sank through my skin, lodging itself in the space between my heart and ribs. It sapped the strength from my limbs, and the breath from my lungs.

I braced my feet against Cazien's, and we were meticulous in our movements as we adjusted our grip. Our arms linked together, Cazien began to move.

He took the brunt of the tide, his hand never leaving the rock on his other side. We moved in tandem, all focus on the water snarling and grabbing at our bodies.

The crossing couldn't be more than twenty feet, but it stretched on. Our strides were small, gaining mere inches at a time, unable to risk any larger step. The water crawled up us, until it reached my breasts, and I nearly swam.

We reached the other side, legs straining as Cazien half-lifted me up and out of the water before climbing out behind me. We sat there, panting. My chest burned and my skin froze. Most of all, I wanted to lie down and rest, but that would lead to hypothermia and death.

"The tide is on its way out." Cazien's voice betrayed his appearance of strength. He'd half-carried me across that channel, and he'd have to do it again on the way out. Years living on the street did not prepare me for fighting against an unrelenting ocean.

"Let's start looking," I said, glad my teeth didn't chatter. I staggered up before he could help me, the icy water running down me and pooling at my feet. His clothes were no better and we'd both need new boots after this.

Every step squelched and echoed in the chamber as we approached the fabled lost treasure. I stopped at the first

half-fallen pile of gold, reaching down to run my hands through the coins.

"There's so much." I was awed at the collection. The legend had claimed the treasure was greater than a dozen dragons' hoards, and it was. The wealth around us baffled me as I tried to comprehend and catalog everything.

The gold coins had an unfamiliar design embossed on them. It was the profile of a woman, judging by the slope of breasts, but from her head sprung snakes. I handed Cazien a coin. "Have you ever seen anything like this?"

He peered at it, stepping closer to one of the glowing flows of lava before shaking his head. "No, but Morgan might know where it's from. She's the scholar of the family. Let's get going."

I pocketed a handful of the coins without a shred of hesitation or guilt. It'd been part of the original deal with Cazien, and besides, there was so much of it sitting here underground.

"What's the relic look like?" We spread out, taking different paths carved by ancient organization methods.

"It's an eye"—I scrunched my nose—"about the size of a human head. It could be in a case, or in a kind of pendant."

The pile closest to me were weapons. There were some I recognized—swords, staves, maces, and the like. Others were completely baffling, and I'd never guess they were weapons if they hadn't been with the rest. One looked like the pipes of a shepherd. Others had so many jewels on them, I questioned the point. But when I reached out to brush my fingers along such one, I jerked back and the pendant at my neck pulsed.

Magical weapons.

Hissing startled me and I twisted to gape at the walls. Red magma had begun to ooze down the black rock.

"The tide isn't the only thing we need to worry about," I called out to Cazien. He stood, gazing behind me, and then we both took in the walls. More of the molten rock had appeared from above, oozing down in diaphanous lines. The air heated, the sulfur competing against the scent of brine. In minutes, I'd be sweating.

"Hurry!"

I didn't need Cazien's order to pick up the pace. I moved from pile to pile, shoving through scrolls which collapsed from age at my touch. I yanked open trunks, spilling their precious jewels out on the ground.

I had been awed by the amount of treasure Xanu collected, but now I was frustrated. There was so much to search. Who needed this much treasure anyways?

Searching through stacked crates, the pendant pulsed again, sending static electricity across my chest. It wasn't like when I'd reached for the weapons earlier.

"I think I have something." I broke open the crates, the wood brittle from repeated heating and cooling. Cazien was at my side in a moment. Together we tore off the remaining panels of wood until we saw it.

Cradled in black velvet was a massive eye, its pupil hazed and blue with cataracts. A roped net of iron wrapped around it, gathered at the back into a short chain which Cazien used to remove it from the box.

"That is creepy," I muttered and Cazien tore his gaze from the relic to me with a hint of a smile.

"I don't disagree." He hooked it to his belt near his sword's sheath. "Let's get the hell out of here."

We were halfway towards the disappearing tide when a solitary figure stepped out of the tunnel's mouth, followed by three others.

"Fancy meeting you here." Durnth grinned, his eyes glowing a vivid orange like the magma pouring around us.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Cazien drew his sword and stood beside me. I drew my own dagger, regretting not grabbing one of the swords in the pile. Knowing my luck, the blade would have been dull from age.

"We've got what we want, Durnth," Cazien declared. He hadn't raised his sword yet. "Let us pass and this can all be yours."

Durnth stepped closer and the intensity of his eyes burned hotter. My brows snapped together.

"What happened to you?"

My old boss grinned, and red veins rose up from under his skin, pulsing with light. "I found the most valuable thing about this place. The magic it holds."

I looked past him to the three remaining men, none of whom I recognized. Cazien followed my gaze.

"Didn't you used to have more friends?" Sarcasm laced through Cazien's words. If Durnth noticed, he didn't react with more than shrugging a shoulder.

"Sacrifices always have to be made for power."

"We found Yaun." Durnth's supernatural eyes turned to me. "Was that you?"

"He tried to take the power first. I took it from him."

Durnth had always been reasonable when presented with logic. "You have the power, and all of the treasure, Durnth. There's no reason to try to kill us and if we don't get out of here soon, we'll all burn."

Durnth snapped his fingers and the three remaining men trudged forward, their arms limp at their side. "Make a bridge."

Their eyes were blackened with soot, but unlike Yaun, whatever Durnth did to them, they'd survived in some capacity.

"Take the relic," Cazien said under his breath. "The first chance you get, cross closest to the fire. The tide will try to drag you out, but you should have enough time to make it to the other side."

The men slipped into the water, one after another. The now outgoing tide seemed to do nothing to them. Durnth must be using whatever magic he'd found to steady them. They stretched out their arms, making a narrow bridge for Durnth to walk over.

I didn't reach for the relic at Cazien's belt. "And you?" He was an idiot if he thought I was leaving him.

"I can fight him long enough to keep you safe—"

I snorted. "Don't insult me, Caz. I'm not leaving you and we're both getting the hell out of here."

Durnth began to stride over the outstretched arms as steady as a wooden bridge. "Besides, I've got a few scores

to settle from the last decade. What better payment than blood?"

Cazien looked at me entirely inappropriately. It was the same look he'd given me after I threw the dagger between his legs. Durnth was halfway across the water, but Cazien gripped my chin. "You know that violence is my favorite foreplay, darling."

I shouldn't love that part of him, but I'd lived in the dark enough to find pleasure from it. I met his gaze, mustering as wicked of a look as I could.

"Remember how you wanted me in only my bandolier?" The flare of his eyes told me he did. "Well, when we get out of here, I'll make that happen. Knife to your neck and all."

His rumble of pleasure rose over the water and the spitting flames of lava.

Durnth stepped onto our side of the cavern, the ground shuddering underneath us.

"How touching." Durnth drew his sword. The men stayed in the water. "I was always a sucker for a tragedy."

Cazien didn't reply to the bravado, breaking the Constinbul street custom, and charged the short distance, blade ready to strike. Durnth blocked the first strike, stepping back closer to the edge of the water. If Cazien could shove him into the water, he'd be sucked down towards the sea. I slipped a knife from my bandolier, moving forward, waiting for an opportunity to strike.

Cazien rained blows down on Durnth, and the man should never have been fast enough or skilled enough to hold his own. He was a dirty street fighter, not a war-sharpened combatant. It was a flurry of blows, their blades

slicing through the air, the steel reflecting the molten earth around us.

In any other situation, it would have been awe-inspiring. But I was petrified as, somehow, Durnth kept pace with the man who'd bested a demon. Durnth might win against Cazien, who was exhausted and still recovering from a near fatal wound.

Red veins glowed under the man's tunic as he parried, moving them so it was Cazien trapped between him and the water. Durnth dodged the parry, raising his blade to strike.

I threw the knife, burying it between his shoulder blades to the hilt. He grunted, his sword still in motion.

The steel swords struck, Cazien's knees buckling under Durnth's strength.

Impossible.

Red light began to drip around the hilt of my knife instead of blood. I pulled another blade, burying it beside the first one. Durnth pressed down against Cazien, both of their arms bulging with effort. "If you want to beat me, boy, you'll have to use that darkness in you."

"No!" I scrambled towards Cazien, slipping on the damned gold coins. "Cazien, don't!"

If he let the darkness take him here, I wouldn't be able to push it back. Cazien's eyes met mine across the distance, and I skidded to a stop at the apology in his eyes.

He burst upright against Durnth, pushing him back. In the same movement, he released the giant's eye, lobbing it towards me, and then reached for his neck. Too late I realized what he meant to do.

He ripped off the charmed amulet Corwyn had given us and tossed it into the water.

His beautiful eyes that reminded me of a winter storm over the sea flooded with black.

Durnth laughed and launched himself back into the sword fight.

The giant's eye rolled towards my feet as I watched the two men battle. They'd both had a profuse effect on my life. One was my past, the other my future.

I would not let Durnth take that future away from us.

I scooped up the giant's eye, hooking it to my belt. It was lighter than it appeared, soft too, which made me gag. The tide was retreating, quicker than we could afford. The water barely reached the hardened molten rock. It wouldn't be long until the fire ruptured and sought its own attack on the sea.

The sound of Durnth's laughter and Cazien's twisted growls filled the cavern. I'd never heard Cazien sound like that before, and it terrified me. I rushed back through the paths now littered with treasure until I found the weapons cache.

There. A longsword.

I drew it from the pile, sending other weapons clattering down in my rush. Pain burst hot in my foot and I jerked away from the hilt that'd fallen on me. About to step over it, a glow caught my eye. The sword was almost the twin of the one in my hand, save for the glowing aquamarine jewel in the pommel. I grabbed it, switching the plain sword to my left hand.

It was magic, I had no doubt as it wrapped around my hand and up my arm. It didn't burn, not like the magma around us, and it didn't send electricity crawling around my arm. This magic felt peaceful, it flowed like a shallow creek warmed by the sun. Light, but moving with an inevitable purpose.

A summer rainstorm sent to quash a wildfire.

Durnth and Cazien had fought their way towards the center of the treasure, ignoring the paths entirely. Instead, they kicked away priceless statues, one vase shattered against the stone, releasing an ear-splitting cry, forcing me to cover my ears. The men paid it no heed.

Durnth appeared more and more like the blackened rock with every strike. Veins of red bulged in spiderwebs across his body, as if his blood had been replaced by lava. And Cazien...

A keen tore from me as fear captured me in its grasp. Not for myself, but for the man I loved. His eyes had already turned to obsidian but now his own skin turned ashen. His hands were black, as if he'd dipped them in oil. And his face... his face was marked with black, as if he cried black tar.

He snarled at his opponent, and it was a sound of supernatural destruction. He had faced a demon, and this was the scar he bore, the darkness he carried inside him at all times.

I would not let that demon win after so many years.

Durnth stepped around Cazien, who blocked the next strike with a two-handed grip. It left his side open—the

same side the Kanoi had struck. Instead of a blade, though, Durnth pivoted, kicking his foot directly onto the wound.

Cazien fell to the ground, his sword sliding out of reach.

I raised my swords, defiance flowing in my blood.

Only for Durnth to cast his hand out towards me and then I was caught by the air itself. Heat surrounded me, thick and corporeal, like a sauna given form. Screaming with rage, I pushed against the force as Durnth kicked Cazien's blade away. Cazien got to his hands and knees, his hair hanging around his face.

Durnth kicked him in the side again, sending him rolling across gold and uncut gems.

"Cazien!" My pendant sparked under my shirt, blue flashes piercing the grip of the heat around me. The blade cut through the air like it was thick mud. With them both, I began to carve my way out of Durnth's magical hold.

Cazien lay sprawled on his back, his face bloodied. Durnth stepped up beside him, tutting like a disapproving tutor.

"Pity," he said, bringing his sword up. "I'd expected more from you. Your heart isn't as black as you had us believe."

Durnth brought down his sword as I screamed, shoving through the last of the magic. Cazien's hand shot up, catching the blade with a grunt. Then he caught Durnth in the stomach with a brutal kick, letting the blade go as the man staggered back. Cazien's arm fell to the ground and he rolled to his side.

Durnth roared with rage, preparing to cut Cazien down at last.

I stepped between them, blades out in front of me.

Durnth tilted his head. "You have always been a survivor, Minerva. That's what I've always liked about you."

I grit my teeth. "Shut up." Was Cazien on his feet?

"You were a defiant child, angry at the world. I could have taken your hand that day, but I knew you could rise to power at my side." He lowered his blade, the angry glow within him settling.

The air rippled in front of us, nothing more than a natural phenomenon from the molten lava flowing down the walls and into the earth below.

I risked a look behind me. The water level had fallen to the men's waists, who remained standing like stone pillars. Lava began to weep through the cracks in the stone now that the water was gone.

Cazien still struggled to get to his feet.

"I gave you everything you needed to thrive in Constinbul." While I was distracted, Durnth had gotten closer. "He can give you nothing except a warm bed. I can give you real power, Minerva. I've embraced the Lost King's power. Yaun wasn't strong enough, didn't have the strength of will or the determination to survive above all else like you do."

I lowered my swords, not much, but enough that Durnth's face softened. He took a step closer. I took two back.

"What sort of power?"

"The power of the volcano itself," he replied, and the room flared with red light. "You would finally have the power to seek out those who murdered your family. You could burn them to ashes, Minerva."

He moved forward, and I kept retreating. How close was I to the channel? Cazien couldn't cross on his own, let alone help me. Sweat poured down my face, my clothes, once soaked by seawater, were only damp now.

What Durnth was offering, though, was something I'd only let myself dream of on rare nights. When the world didn't feel wrong or perverse, and that I could deliver the vengeance my mother and father deserved.

How many other families did those men ruin? How many other children did they sell to wealthy nobles? Why were they allowed to exist when innocents had their lives destroyed?

I lowered my swords. "What do I have to do? To accept the power?"

I thought of my mother's beautiful hair, the color of a fawn, the hair I'd inherited.

Durnth lowered his sword and extended his hand. "Only what you've done before. Take my hand."

I thought of my father, of his graceful hands as he showed me how to mark the trails of a new map.

I thought of the men who held my mother and I back. Of the man who slit my father's throat before doing the same to my mother. I thought of the man I'd seen at the gate, the face I'd never forget. The one who'd tried to force himself on me in the bowels of a filth-filled ship.

I glanced back at Cazien, on his knees now, arms barely keeping him upright. He raised his head, his blue eyes bright within the blackness behind his black hair.

I sheathed the plain sword and lowered the other. Durnth stepped closer, not quite within reach.

"With this power, Minerva, you won't need a new start. We can rule over Constinbul. No one will defy us. No one will escape your justice."

"Minerva." Cazien's voice was hallow and broken, my name a plea on his lips.

Durnth stepped forward, the magic around him making the pendant burn against my skin.

"I've protected you before. I always will, my girl."

My hand shook as I raised it, reaching out for his. Cazien made a sound behind me, struggling to rise, to stop me. I took Durnth's hand, his fingers searing into my flesh. Unlike the sword, this magic ate at me like acid. There would be nothing remaining, because there was no other purpose than annihilation in this foul magic.

I screamed and Durnth smiled as my knees bent against the onslaught. He didn't release my hand, crushing my fingers with his brute strength.

I gripped the sword, both it and the pendant's magic flaring out to protect me. Durnth's eyes widened as I forced myself upwards. The magic around me attacked the acid burning in my veins, pushing it back. He tried to release me, but this time I held on.

"Fuck you."

I drove the enchanted blade through his stomach. He screamed in agony as water erupted from the wound, his skin sizzling with steam. I yanked the blade free, staggering backwards. More screams rent the air. The lava had broken free and started to consume the men, still frozen in place by magic. The magic didn't stop them from screaming, though.

I shoved the sword through my belt and pulled Cazien's arm over my shoulders. With an obscene gesture at the collapsing Durnth, I pulled us into the water and let the tide drag us away.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



**T**he world had narrowed down to the darkness around me, the roaring in my ears, the burning in my lungs, and Cazien's tunic in my grip.

The tide sucked us down a tunnel, thrashing and spinning us until I had no sense of direction. My lungs burned, and I fought to not suck in a breath full of water.

The darkness changed, and air bubbles swarmed around me. A current wrapped around my ankles, watery hands dragging me away. I lost one of my holds on Cazien, his body a limp figure darker than the rest of the deep blue.

I screamed as the current tugged me away, my fingers burning as I clung to the fabric, the little air I had left escaping my lungs.

Black clouded my vision, my muscles weakened, and unexpected bliss began to spread throughout my cold limbs.

I slammed into rock, the water pounding me and Cazien against it before pulling me back and pummeling me again. This time I broke the surface, retching and struggling to

breath. A hand grabbed my shirt. Keeping me from being pulled back down.

Cazien gripped the rocky shore, every line of him waterlogged and weary. The next wave sent us higher against the rock and I grabbed ahold of it.

Shaking, I scaled the black rock, sharp barnacles slicing into my skin. Moments before, my fingers had been numb, but now they burned with saltwater and pain.

The water hit me again, coming to my waist, and I clung to the rock, not daring to move. When it pulled away, I moved again, bleary-eyed and staring upward at a ledge. I crawled over it, the sob turning into a harsh cough as my throat burned.

Cazien lay on the ground beside me, sprawled on his back and unmoving. Scrambling on my hands and knees, I shook his shoulders.

“Cazien.” My voice was nothing more than a hoarse whisper. “Come on, Cazien.” I shook him harder.

His eyes opened, filled with black and no sign of the blue eyes I loved. He’d fought to come back to me in that cavern, and the tide had washed him away again.

I cupped his face, the blood on my hands mixing with the water drops on his face. “Come back to me,” I pleaded. “We’re safe now. We made it.”

His black eyes were unfocused. I pressed a shaking kiss to his lips, but he didn’t respond. “Don’t do this.” I shook my head, and kissed him again, a silent plea. “I love you. Please don’t leave me.”

Don’t let this island steal another person I love.

His lips were as cold as mine, but they moved. His hand came to my waist and tears mixed with the saltwater on my face as he returned the kiss. It was a small kiss, nothing more than a reassurance that we were both alive.

It was the best kiss of my life, and I knew no other kiss could ever top it.

Cazien turned his face, coughing, before looking at me with a half-grin. "Never thought you'd be the type to cry over a man."

I laughed, though it was half sobbing. "I was crying because I thought I wasn't going to get paid."

He snorted and pushed me back. He groaned as he sat upwards, his hands running through his knotted hair. "What the hell happened to Durnth?"

I eased to my feet, my legs still weak. "I have no idea. But he had some sort of magic. This sword seemed to do the trick, though."

I drew the blade, its magic washing over me again. It was a miracle neither of us had been impaled on it.

"How did you know it wasn't that far to the ocean?"

"I didn't."

Cazien whipped around to look at me, incredulity on his face. Too exhausted to make a joke, I shrugged. He started laughing. It was a quiet laugh at first, no more than a few breaths. Then it grew louder as the insanity of the last week descended.

I joined in, pressing a hand against my stomach as we grew loud and boisterous. He came over to me, and still laughing, we wrapped our arms around each other. We

laughed so hard that if we hadn't held on, we'd have fallen back to the ground.

No doubt we looked manic when the two young Aeaeans found us like that.

"Excuse us?" The light-haired girl asked. She couldn't be more than seventeen. The boy beside her clearly appointed himself her protector, though he wasn't much more than a year older. He stepped in front of her though, his hand inching towards the knife strapped to his thigh.

She pushed him away though, with an exaggerated enough eyeroll that I smiled. "Do you need help? Lanen and I were passing, and we heard you."

"How far is it to the wall?" I asked at the same time as Cazien asked if they had any whiskey on them. I glared at him and he shrugged.

"Less than a day's walk away." She eyed us, taking in our ragged state. "Though I don't know if you'd make it. How in Sedus's name did you come to be in the water around here? This is the most dangerous stretch of water on the coast."

I laughed again. Less than a day's walk from the wall and freedom.

"Is your village nearby?" I asked instead of answering her question. "We can pay for a night's rest, and a hot meal —"

"And whiskey."

They eyed us speculatively.

"We've stayed with both Elder Sanaty and Elder Corwyn during our journey across Aeaea." Hopefully one of their names would carry weight. From the looks they traded, one or both did.

The boy, Lanen, lifted his chin towards me. "You don't look like you can pay."

I pulled a gold coin from my pocket and Cazien guffawed. I flipped it to the boy. "Is that enough?"

He caught it against his chest, eyes wide at the color. Biting it, he nodded to the young woman. "This way, then."

They turned, and we followed them into the woods. Cazien slung his arm over my shoulders, and despite the humidity and our soaked clothes, I didn't push him away.

"So, you couldn't help yourself from pocketing a bit of the treasure?" He whispered in my ear.

I grinned up at him. "A girl has to survive somehow. You're telling me you weren't tempted to grab anything?"

"On the contrary." He dug in a pocket on his bandolier. He pulled out something gold and no bigger than my index finger. He handed it to me. "I saw this and thought of you."

Eyebrows furrowed, I inspected it. "It's a hairpin."

It was more than that, though. There, worked in delicate gold, was a sun half-eclipsed by a moon in silver. Along the golden clip, chips of diamonds winked up at me like the starlit sky. So similar to my father's compass rose on the maps of his trade.

"I couldn't leave it back there," he said, his voice more serious. He pulled it from my fingers and stopped me. With gentle hands, he pinned it into my hair.

Cazien gazed at me, full of tenderness and wonder. "You're beautiful, darling."

I laughed, drawing the attention of our guides, and I tugged him along to catch up. I knew I looked like something the ocean ate and then spat back out. But when

he said it like that, even as my boots squelched with each step, I felt beautiful.

It wasn't much farther to the village, and the young woman—who'd introduced herself as Dedre—showed us to the elder's house. The man eyed us with more suspicion than Lanen but allowed Dedre to show us to the hut kept specifically for guests.

"This close to the wall, we always have guests coming through," she explained as she helped pull blankets from a small cabinet. I took them gratefully. She looked between Cazien and me, her lips pursed in thought. "Would you want your clothes laundered? I'm not sure if we can save your boots, but we can at least get the sea out of your clothes. And water for a bath."

"Prospero bless you," Cazien sighed. "I will gladly take you up on that. I was debating if I'd need to return to Grotto wearing a loincloth made of fronds." He sent her a charming smile which had her blushing.

"I—I'll leave you to change then. I'll see what clothes we may have in the meantime," She wrangled her hands, her gaze snapping between Cazien and the ground. "Just put them outside, and someone will collect them."

Dedre hurried out and I threw the stack of blankets at him. "You are incorrigible."

He dropped the blankets on the sleeping pallets before pulling off his bandolier and letting it fall to the thatched flooring.

His gaze held me hostage as he reached back and pulled off his shirt, revealing sun-kissed skin inch by inch. It joined the bandolier.

He prowled around the central fire pit, stepping so close that his heat sank into me. His hair had dried into a tangled mess of waves that added to his roguish appearance and sent a storm of lust coursing through me.

We had survived and Aeaea hadn't taken him from me.

His hands came around me, his head dipping until his lips brushed against my own.

"I'll take this now." His hands unhooked the giant's eye from my belt and he pulled away, leaving me sputtering.

"What's the matter, darling?" He knew damned well the answer.

"Get over here."

He set the relic on a blanket, more carefully than he'd deposited his clothing.

"Aren't you working for me?"

Still, he walked back to me, the same possessive look in his eye. His hands went to the swords shoved through my belts, drawing them slowly as they slid sensuously against me. He looked at each, testing their weight. "You have exquisite taste, darling."

He lay them on the cabinet the blankets had come from, and his hands returned to my belt. It dropped to the ground without fanfare and I raised my hands as he removed my shirt and bandolier with agonizing patience.

I worked his own belt, before moving to the laces of his pants, moving with nimble accuracy. He reached around me, intent on freeing me from the breastband when the ground shook under us.

The village livestock brayed and clucked as shouts filtered in from outside. We rushed to the door, and I

snagged a blanket to wrap around my shoulders before following Cazien out.

Villagers were calming the livestock and sending wary glances upwards, but otherwise there seemed to be no wild concern.

Lanen stalked up to us, a stack of what I presumed was clothing in his hands. His face was pinched and Cazien took the bundle when offered.

"What the hell was that?" he asked our rescuer.

Lanen looked up at the sky. Towards the volcano, I realized. "Agni's stirring. It happened yesterday too. Tonight there will be sacrifices to him in hopes that he will spare us his wrath and settle his fires once more." The boy left us, but he stopped after a few steps, looking back at us. "I suggest you two make for the protection of the wall at first light."

I put my hand on Cazien's arm. "We will. Thank you, Lanen."

He nodded sharply before going to assist the others with the still bellowing livestock.

I tugged at Cazien. "Let's go back inside."

The rumbling volcano had cut through the tension we'd built, replaced by bone-deep exhaustion. We stripped down, tugging on the blissfully clean and dry traditional Aeanean tunics and trousers. When I deposited our clothes outside of the front door, someone had already been by to place a tray with three ceramic-covered bowls by the door. When I brought it inside, Cazien directed me to sit on the sleeping pallets.

Ravenous, we ate the spicy lamb and squash stew in silence, alternating bites of the stew and the garlic and basil-heavy bulgur grains. The last bowl had a loaf of exquisitely soft bread the size of two fists, and I could have wept when its light flavor with a touch of sweetness burst on my tongue. We devoured every bite, using the bread to sop up every trace of the stew.

He pushed the tray holding the now empty bowls off the pallets and onto the floor before tugging me down with him to stretch out.

I settled against his chest, letting his strong heartbeat lull me into relaxation.

"I seem to recall a promise about a bandolier and a knife."

Cazien's words kindled embers of warmth within me. "So do I—" A yawn interrupted me, and he sighed dramatically.

"I guess we should rest." He rolled me off of him and to my side, before wrapping an arm around my chest and nestling my hips against his. For all his teasing, he was as tired as I was.

I curled my fingers through his, wiggling my hips.

"Minx," he murmured against my neck before kissing me there. I smiled and did it once more before settling. Hopefully Dedre would wake us when the bathwater had been prepared, but until then, we could sleep—safe and in each other's arms, the key to Viridian's freedom in our possession.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



“**N**ew boots are definitely on the list of first things that are happening when we get back into the city.” I glared at my offending boots. The left sole had started to separate, and we still had a few miles to the gate.

Both of our boots were ruined from the prolonged time in seawater, not to mention the distance we’d covered by foot.

“We need to send a messenger to Sanaty,” I continued. “If we had the gear, I’d say we’d head there first.” Cazien frowned, his concern for the two warhorses plain. “We’ll regroup, then hire ponies again to get out there quickly. I don’t want to linger any longer than necessary.”

Since we woke up, he’d been filled with a renewed urgency. There had been no flirting, no talk of lingering in each other’s arms. Not that it had offended me. I wanted off this island too. Once we were safely on board a ship, crossing the Dark Sea, then we could steal time with each other since we’d have nothing much to do.

A rumble filled the air, like distant thunder, but the sky was cloudless above us. Another reason not to delay.

"How often does it erupt?" Cazien quickened his pace and I didn't protest. I ached everywhere, and the sponge bath we'd had at the village hadn't done much to make me feel truly clean. Thoughts of the bath at Jacob's Cradle came forward, and if we stayed there again, I wouldn't mind letting Cazien join.

Maybe. I was rather sore after all and a nice long soak sounded divine.

"As far as I know, it hasn't erupted within a generation," I answered with a wary look skywards. It had to be coincidence that the volcano began to stir the same day we'd entered the tunnels in the desolation. "Once we're behind the wall, we'll be safe, though."

"How does that work, anyways?"

I shrugged. "To spare the people of Grotto, Agni or Sedus crafted the wall. None of the magma or rocks launched into the sky can enter the city."

He gave a sidelong look at me. "They don't know which god?"

"The priests of both gods claim the miracle."

"Figures."

A familiar birdcall sounded and we both looked up to see Zypher soaring along the path towards us.

"That's a good sign," I said as the golden eagle landed on Cazien's outstretched arm. He pulled off the rolled parchment, launching the eagle upwards so it could find a nearby perch. I crowded close to him to read the letter.

"Seems like Gavret and Resuld put down a rebellion on the ship," he summarized. "They're docked in Grotto, hiring another crew to get us back to Constinbul, since most have been disposed."

I snorted. Disposed was a diplomatic way of saying killed and kicked off the side of the deck. Cazien flipped the letter over and let out a sharp bark of laughter before handing it to me.

*And if this reaches Durnth instead of my brother: Go fuck yourself on an iron spike before I fuck you with one personally.*

"Brutal, but not undeserving." I handed it back to him. "We don't have any way to reply."

Cazien thought for a moment before pulling a smooth round rock, the size of the golden coins I'd swiped. It had the same crest as his signet ring. Cazien held it in his hand, palm flat, and Zypher glided from the branch above us and grabbed it with surprising grace in those massive talons of his.

"It'd be unlikely that Durnth would think to send that," he said when he saw my tilted head. "We all keep a few of them on us, in case we need to leave a token or message behind. He'll know it's me."

"Clever."

The Hallows had a similar system for the streets of Constinbul. A sigil that, to anyone else, would look like random scratch marks. But to the Hallows, it could mean one of a few different messages. They were useful on long jobs. Not that I needed to remember them anymore. I was never going back to them.

"Think Jacob will have a room available for us?"

I tilted my head in consideration. "Maybe. With the volcano being active, more people might be pushing towards the city. Not every village prefers to risk it out there."

My prediction proved to be right as the gate came within sight at last. There was a line to get in, composed of both trappers and traders, as well as Aeaeans. A few of them were recognizable.

"Sanaty!" Cazien shouted out in greeting. The elder and his wife, along with many of his small village turned towards us. Following them, but not being led, were Nixus and Cian, who immediately pushed through the undergrowth to get to us. Nixus tossed her head, whinnying with excitement and even Cian danced close to me, shoving her nose against my shoulder until I started scratching her jaw.

"I missed you too," I told her, pleased at the roan's excitement. "I don't know how I'm going to let you go off with Gavret when we get back."

"Were you successful in your hunt?" Sanaty beckoned us to join their position in line.

"We were," Cazien answered, pitching his voice low. "After we left your village, it became quite an adventure. Thank you for caring for the horses."

"I don't think they'd have allowed us otherwise. We'd have removed their saddles, but they wouldn't let us close." Sanaty clapped him on the shoulder. "Where is the rest of your party?"

Cazien and I traded looks, and the elder caught them.

He shook his head. “You must share your story when we are safe behind the wall.”

“Preferably with a lot of whiskey, or rice wine.”

We walked beside the group, who’d explained that their village was small enough that they’d rather await Agni and the volcano out in Grotto, and from the payment Cazien had offered for the return of the ponies and then the caring of the warhorses, they had enough to ensure each family had a room in the city.

The line shuffled forward, the guards overwhelmed with the numbers as they checked outgoing logs and recorded new incoming names.

When it was our turn, I was relieved to see no sign of Torun, who’d recorded our departure.

The woman flipped through the clipped papers on her board, eyes narrow. “Says here you had a party of twenty?” She looked pointedly between Cazien and me, and our lack of gear.

“Kanoi,” I supplied quickly. “The half-fae tribe.”

She shuddered, her face blanching. She made a notation and let us pass.

We separated from Sanaty and promised to find him before we left Grotto. He and his villagers were off to find more affordable accommodations than Jacob’s Cradle.

“If you can’t, Elder Sanaty,” Cazien said, clasping the man’s hand, “find us at Jacob’s Cradle. If we’re able to get lodging there, we’ll secure the large room above the stables for you and your own.”

“Your generosity is appreciated, Cazien.” The elder turned to me and offered a quick bow and then our parties

separated. Feet aching, I dragged myself up into Cian's saddle. Cazien's expression made me race to beat him.

"Everything hurts, and I don't care if you think less of me for riding the rest of the way."

Cian seemed to approve, at least, as there was a clear spring to her steps. Cazien only waited until we were off the main path before mounting Nixus. The two horses carried us the rest of the way to Jacob's Cradle, where the innkeeper greeted us like old friends.

Fortunately, he had the same room available, and he didn't question where the rest of the men were. Again, he accepted Cazien's signet ring as collateral. I trudged up the familiar stairs and into the room.

It hadn't changed since I'd last been here, but I had.

I went to the cobalt blue shutters and pushed them open, careless of letting the cool air escape the room.

Grotto stretched out below and beyond, the city louder now with the increased population. I could still hear the waves breaking against the wall in the distance, and I settled there, leaning against the windowsill.

That's how Cazien found me. He came up beside me, trapping me with his arms on either side of me on the sill. "I can see the ship." His voice was soft, his entire posture settled as if the urgency he woke with had been satisfied.

I looked behind us as feet shuffled against the floor, and offered a smile to the women bringing in the bath and warm water. Only one returned the smile, and it was timid at that. Then I remembered Cazien's threat from the first time we'd stayed there and sighed. The women were probably terrified of us.

"Jacob let me look through the items which had been left behind," Cazien said, pulling away. "Nothing would have fit me, but I think the shoes might work for you."

I followed him to the bed, where he'd dropped a bundle of what turned out to be clothes roughly in my size. I picked up the sandals, braided leather strips which were secured to a thick leather sole—a traditional shoe on the island.

They weren't boots, but they'd work until I got back to Tamera's and her husband could make me a new pair. Maybe I'd order some for Cazien as well. I could hear her laughter now at the thought of telling her how Cazien Demonbane Talon had stolen my heart.

The women left, leaving behind the warm bath, soaps, oils, and thick towels. Cazien pressed a kiss to my head. "You bathe. I'm going to the docks to meet Gavret. I can borrow a set of clothes from him, and burn these ones later."

I slung my arms around his hips loosely, dropping my head back to look up at him. "You sure you don't want to join me?"

The heat in his eyes matched the heat in my stomach. "That bath isn't large enough for the both of us, darling."

"We could make do," I murmured.

He kissed me, before tugging my arms from him. "I've corrupted you already."

"Is that a complaint?"

"A boast, actually."

I let him pull away, though, knowing he needed to let his brother know we'd succeeded. A tendril of doubt stroked

down my spine and I grabbed his hand as he turned to leave.

“You’re coming back, aren’t you?”

His lips turned upwards. “Worried about not getting paid, darling?”

My trepidation must have been clear, since he gathered me in his arms again, pressing a hard kiss against my lips.

“You still have a promise to keep,” he murmured against my lips.

I held his biceps, using him as shelter against the storm of nerves. “I love you, Cazien.”

He kissed me again and eased away. “I’ll see you soon.”

Holding myself, I watched as he left, leaving me with a roguish grin that had my cheeks flaming.

Unwilling to waste the warm water, I stripped down and eased in with a sigh. Tension leaked out of me as I piled my hair on top of my head, sinking as low into the water as I could manage. When it grew tepid, I set to scrubbing every inch of me, and when I was done, I did it again.

Only when my skin was bright red and tingled did I finally get out. I’d even scrubbed my scalp harshly enough I was surprised there wasn’t more hair floating in the water.

I pulled on the clothes Cazien had found, thankfully clean and laundered by the innkeeper’s staff. The pants were a bit loose, but comfortably so. The top, however, was made for someone with a much larger bosom. My belt made up for it somewhat, but I still swam in the shirt. The sandals, at least, were nearly a perfect fit.

Standing at the window, I worked my fingers through my hair. It was a beautiful day, the sea and sky meeting far off

in the distance, the two blues melding into one another until it was nearly impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. Seagulls and osprey flew through the air, calling out their territories.

Despite the rumblings from the volcano, the city brimmed with life and music. The people had utmost faith in the protection of the gods.

I pulled back my hair, pinning it with the golden sun and silver moon Cazien had gifted me. He'd be gone for a while, and it was time I properly said goodbye to the city which had once been my home.

It was easy enough to slip from the inn and blend into the crowded streets wearing the local clothing. I wasn't even the only one wearing a dagger at my belt. I'd left the swords behind, not wanting to draw attention to myself.

I made my way to a bank and exchanged two of the gold coins for smaller, modern coins. They were likely worth more than the rate I got, given that they were so old, but I didn't want the man asking any questions to their origin. Money in hand, I walked through the streets, following my nose to a food vendor.

The scent of roasting goat, tangy yogurt, and spicy cumin and cilantro had my mouth watering. A few copper coins bought me flatbread wrapped around the meat rolled in grape leaf, along with a small parchment bag of honeyed dates.

The city thrived with life, and to a stranger, perhaps it resembled paradise. But I'd lived in the slums of Constinbul long enough to see the signs of poverty even here.

Narrow alleys were grime covered, their walls dingy instead of the pristine white of the main streets. People lurked in the shadows, wearing tattered clothing and fraying sandals. Children with matted hair watched people with wide hungry eyes. No place could truly be a paradise after all.

I recognized the intersection I found myself in, sucking the last bits of honey from the dates I'd purchased. Staring up the cobbled street, the white town homes rising on the hill on either side had me debating. Did I really want to see my old home?

I could still see the harbor from here, and the ship Cazien and I had sailed in on. He'd probably be on it now, talking with his brother and getting a change of clothes. He promised he'd come back for me. I had enough time.

I turned off of the main road, my feet following the path I'd memorized as a child. The house looked the same. It'd been repainted in the last few years, the white bright against the blue sky.

The flowerpots hanging from the windows my mother had installed were still there, the blooms well-tended too. The patio was sandstone, blue-glazed pots holding gnarled olive trees and tall green grasses that smelled of citrus. The orange tree I'd planted with my mother was there, fruit smaller than my fist growing on it. I never got to taste one.

At least the magic had only taken one memory of them. I strained for it, testing the magic, but it was futile. I knew I was missing a memory, and that it involved my parents, but everything else escaped me.

The front door opened, and a young boy ran out, shouting chasing him. He laughed, until he saw me staring at the house. A woman, his mother, I guessed, came to the doorway, and watched me curiously.

"I used to live here," I called, trying to explain my presence. "I wanted to see it one last time before I left the island."

Her face morphed into pity and it was then I realized that maybe my family's story was known here. My mother and father had been popular and well-liked.

I forced a smile and shoved my hands back into my pockets before walking back towards the main way.

I should go down to the docks and get ready to leave. We didn't need to stay at the inn, not when every day we lingered was another day Viridian was trapped in the fae realm.

I ran into someone, their shoulder clipping mine and making me spin. I righted myself, and made to apologize. The words caught in my mouth.

"Hello, little Minerva," Torun greeted, his smile full of oil. He looked me up and down, and another man I recognized from that night came up next to him. "Though I guess you're not as little anymore."

They couldn't do anything to me. Not in the middle of a public street. I backed up, only to run into someone's chest.

A blackened hand came around my waist and I whirled out of his grip. "Impossible," I breathed out.

Durnth cocked his head. "Took me awhile to get out of that cavern, Min. No thanks to the gut wound you gave me. But my magic helped heal me up enough."

He reached for me and I yanked away, but that put me in Torun's reach. He grabbed me by both arms.

"Get off of me," I growled. "If I don't kill you, Cazien will."

Durnth laughed, drawing the attention of nearby pedestrians. He waved them on. "A bit of a family squabble."

No one questioned him. My heart sank.

"And when would he kill us? He'd have to stick around for that." Durnth grabbed my chin and forced me to look towards the harbor. He tutted as tears sprang to my eyes. "You really should have taken my offer back there, Minerva. Now your lover has left you behind like all the other women he's snared into his bed."

I wanted to deny it. "He loves me," I said, but was it to them or myself?

"Did he ever actually tell you that?" I hated the pity in Durnth's voice.

I opened my mouth to respond, but snapped it shut. Cazien hadn't said he loved me—not specifically, while I'd told him repeatedly.

"You screwed me out of the treasure," Durnth continued. "But I always plan for the unexpected. Met these nice gentlemen before we left the gates. And now it's time for them to finally get their money's worth for you."

Torun and the other man laughed, dark and sinister, while I stared at the ship sailing towards the opening in the wall. Cazien had gotten on that ship and left me behind. Pain ripped through my heart as I went limp. My heart ached so painfully, the blow to the back of my head was a mercy as I fell into unconsciousness.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



**M**y stomach heaved, and the world swayed. Musk filled the air, stale urine and other things I'd really rather not contemplate. Again, my stomach dropped out from under me, and I was finally forced to open my eyes.

I was in a nightmare. One that had haunted me for the last decade.

The ship heaved again, crates sliding with the rough sea.

I was in a barred cage in the bowels of a ship. It could even be the same one that had transported me to Constantinbul so long ago.

The ship tossed to the other side, and I let my stomach go. The contents told me it hadn't been that long, at least, since someone had hit me on the back of the head.

Since Durnth had sold me out and Cazien left me behind.

My heart broke into pieces, the rock of the boat throwing my body against the metal cage. This time, I was the only one down here. The other cells were empty, and I thanked Prospero for small mercies.

I didn't know if what little bit of me was holding it together could have handled seeing others—especially children—locked up.

It meant I could give myself over to the despair.

Tears burned my cheeks as I rested my head against the cold metal. The phantom touch of Cazien's arms around me, his body surrounding mine, consuming me, gave me comfort despite everything. It didn't make sense. None of it made sense.

I'd told Cazien he was a good man, and I still believed it. I knew bad men; I'd been dealing with them for years.

Even if he didn't love me, he'd respected me. And Durnth was right. I was a survivor.

They'd left me unshackled, and I forced myself to stand, clinging to the bars as the ship swayed and made my stomach spin. The back of my head ached fiercely; the damn bastards had probably given me a concussion. Durnth had set this all up. His so-called business contacts had been planning to sell me out to the very people I'd escaped.

There was nothing of use within reach of my cell. Only aged crates nailed securely shut. The only light came from open portholes, casting everything in a gloomy haze. I couldn't see much, but it meant anyone else down here couldn't either.

They'd taken everything from me that could be useful, including my bandolier and even the gold coins from Xanu's treasure. The leather ties on my sandals could make a garrot, but I'd rather not be barefoot down here. The sandals were better than nothing.

I dropped my head against the cell bars, wincing as something stabbed into my scalp.

No. They couldn't have—

I grabbed my head and forced back the laugh. They'd left me with the damn hairpin Cazien had given me. It was more valuable than the coins and they'd overlooked it somehow.

It wasn't only worth money.

I pulled it out of my hair, not caring as some hair came with it.

It wasn't a proper lockpick, but I'd worked with worse before. Picking locks required more patience than I usually had, but I slid my hands between the bars and began to work. Twist. Pause. Lift. Turn. Side to Side.

Over and over, I made the smallest movements with the hairpin, the gold sunbeams cutting into my aching palms.

Twice I stopped, certain someone was coming down. But no, all the voices stayed muffled through the deck above.

The lock clicked and the cell door creaked from rust as it moved. I eased it open, certain the creaking was loud enough to hear over the ocean.

The boat rocked sharply, sending me stumbling into a tied-down stack of boxes. Men shouted above, only to be drowned out by thunder so loud it vibrated through the ship's hull. A storm was not what I needed right now. What I needed was something to use as a weapon.

Something shone out of the darkness and I made my way to the other side, watching the ladder in case one of my captors decided to check on me. When I reached it, I grinned. The light had reflected off of two metal rods,

meant to be used in construction. But they were the length of my long dagger and would work well as clubs.

The light... I peered upwards, then climbed on top of one of the crate stacks. I had to stand on my toes to look out of the porthole.

The sky was crystalline blue. So what had been—

The thunder boomed again, the sound shaking through me as I clung to the hull. Then fire rained down. It wasn't thunder at all.

The volcano was erupting.

The hatch door opened, and I leapt down, cursing the splash as I landed in the few inches of standing water.

"Oy, the cell door is open," said the man who entered first.

"What?" A second man had joined him down in the hull with me. I didn't recognize either of them.

"You heard me." They walked towards the cell as I eased around them behind the crates, gripping the two metal rods. I didn't see any blades on them beyond the daggers at their belt.

"If she's gone—"

"She can't be," the first one interrupted and peered around in the dim light. They were stout men, probably nearing their forties, scarred and tanned from years at sea. I needed to stop them from reporting my escape but the quarters were too tight to fight properly in.

There. The crate stacks opened up ahead of me, but not so much that they could both get at me. Now to lure them over.

I didn't want them going for those daggers, so I used a tactic I'd learned from the women in the city—one I'd never used before and had my cheeks burning even as I prepared myself.

Pushing through the heartbreak, I thought of Cazien's head between my legs and then let out the most obscene moan I could manage without laughing.

"What the devils?" They both laughed.

"Jones? Is that you? Taking a turn with the lady? You could never keep it in your pants."

I moaned again, letting out a breathless curse. They weren't hoping for a reply, were they? Gods, don't let them be respectful enough to try to give us privacy. I really couldn't keep moaning this theatrically for more than a few minutes.

"Thank fuck," I whispered as splashing footsteps approached.

"You're going to have to let us have a go if you don't want us—" The man came around and paused, squinting into the dim light, confused.

I didn't let him get a good look in before I swung the metal rod as hard as I could up between his legs. He went down with a hoarse yowl, and the other man staggered back.

He turned to make a run for the ladder, but I threw the other rod as hard as I could, a satisfying dull thud landing as it collided with his shoulder and head.

I leapt over the still howling man, cursing me and my mother, and delivered a swift kick with my heel to the fallen man's chin. His eyes rolled to the back of his head and he

went still. Scooping up the rod I'd thrown, I marched back over to the man still cradling his bleeding manhood. Good. Bastard didn't deserve to have a functioning ball sack.

I shoved the end of the rod into the soft flesh under his chin. "How many men are on board?"

"You bitch."

I rolled my eyes. "Men never have creative insults. It's always bitch or cunt when it comes to a woman." I dug the rod deeper. "How many men on board?"

He sneered and the moment he opened his mouth, I shoved the rod in his mouth, making him gag. "Don't like it, do you? Having something forced down your throat. Tell me what I want to know, and I won't show you what it feels like having it shoved up your ass at the same time."

He gagged again as I removed it. I waited, poised to give another demonstration.

"Skeleton crew," he spat out, vitriol in every word. "Enough to get across the sea. Us two"—he jerked his head towards his fallen comrade—"and two others, plus the three who hired us."

Five men. I chewed on my cheek, considering. I could take five men, if I was careful. But if Durnth still had whatever magic Xanu's curse had imbued in him, he'd win. And even if I removed them all, I couldn't sail a ship this size by myself.

He made to move and I tapped his cheek with the rod, a reminder that I wasn't nearly distracted enough for him to try anything.

"Is there a lifeboat?" He nodded warily. "Good." I stood, then swung the rod down across his head with a sick crack.

He still breathed, but I'd broken his jaw and he wouldn't be waking up for a while.

I removed the daggers from each of them, sticking them through my belt and taking up my rods again. A decade ago, I'd been a terrified girl, unable to save herself from monstrous men.

I started to climb the ladder.

I was not a terrified girl anymore. I was brokenhearted, exhausted, sore, and pissed the hell off.

And I was getting the hell off this ship.

The level above the cargo hold had small rooms, likely sleeping rooms for any paying passengers. Only the kidnapped people were forced down below.

I eased my way off of the ladder, since I'd need to make it to the other end of the hallway. I made it a few steps before the ship heaved to the left, throwing me against the wall. Men shouted orders above, more than the man had said down below.

I had half a thought to go down and slit his throat for lying but the number of men didn't change my plans... much.

Heavy footsteps echoed down the hall, over the slosh of the few inches of water trapped in the hall. The first door I came to was unlocked, and I slipped in.

The stench of sweat and stale ale filled the room, forcing me to cover my mouth and nose. A man snored loudly from the plank bed built into the side, the empty bottle cradled in his arm at least promising he wouldn't be waking up any time soon.

The footsteps and muttered cursing passed me, and I slipped out. A quick look told me the man had continued past the central ladder and farther along the ship's hall.

My plan was simple. Get to the main deck, get the lifeboat overboard, and kill as many men as necessary to survive.

The thundering of the volcano came again, inspiring more shouting. Then, in the silence of voices, a hard crash and something struck the boat hard enough to throw me to the floor. Had we been struck by a boulder?

Three men wrenched open their doors and, as one, their gazes found me as I stood, hand braced on the wall.

So it began.

They pushed towards me, their short daggers out. The hall was too narrow for more than one to face me at a time, but it meant it was too narrow for both of the metal rods I wielded as well. Dropping one, I retrieved one of my stolen daggers.

I fought, my mind quiet from the panic and heartache I'd woken with. All that mattered was the men in front of me—the next strike, block, or parry. I ignored the pain lancing through my arms that told me they'd struck a blow.

A detached part of me categorized the injuries, and none I felt were more substantial than surface cuts. Which meant they could be under orders not to kill or seriously injure me.

I was under no such orders.

Shouts continued above us, but I ignored them as I struck down the final man only to have two more drop from the deck above. One of them didn't get back up, though. Interesting.

The other man was so broad, I wondered how he fit down the hall, let alone expected to fight. He easily had a hundred pounds on me, but I'd taken men like him before. It'd cost me, but I knew I could win.

He favored his left ankle, perhaps he twisted it in the fall from above. I pressed him on the left, slashing the dagger through the air too quickly for him to strike back. When my opening came, I swung the metal rod underhandedly, connecting with his left shin above the ankle.

It wasn't a clean hit, or as strong as it could have been, but his knee buckled as he cried out. I rushed him.

He got a solid punch in to my side, maybe even cracking a rib, but I shoved my stolen dagger into his jugular, yanking it back out with a spray of blood. He collapsed, hands going to his throat as he tried to stop the blood.

Hand pressed to my right side, definitely a cracked rib, I walked over him, and towards the narrow steep steps that led to the top deck. The man at the base of them had a wound to his chest, his blood mixing with the seawater sloshing around.

I peered upwards. I wouldn't be surprised if Xanu's curse made Durnth more blood-crazy than he'd been back in Constinbul.

Get to the lifeboat and get the hell back to Grotto. I climbed the stairs.

When I got to the top deck, it was chaos. I stopped in the shadows, unable to believe the sight. Only the scream of a familiar golden eagle told me it was real and not some addle-brained dream and I was still down below in the cargo hold.

Cazien and Gavret were here, fighting with twin savage expressions. The collision hadn't been from the volcano, it'd been from the smaller ship on the port side.

I'd seen and fought with Cazien before, but watching him with his brother... It was an elevated performance that stole my breath. They moved in tandem, a fluidity that came from years of fighting side by side. They were extensions of each other, and even Zypher had a part to play, the eagle diving down to pummel the backs of skulls or gouge deep wounds in opponents.

They were the only ones fighting, taking on the entire crew. Opponents had found their marks, but like me, any wounds seemed superficial.

Gavret plunged his sword into his opponent... Soal, one of the three men who'd kidnapped me. A swift kick to the hip relieved Gavret's sword of the body.

My eyes found Cazien's as a pivot turned him towards me.

His blue eyes held a storm of rage that quelled for a split second as he beheld me, and then his fighting became more vicious.

I threw myself into the fray, stabbing and cutting, dodging and parrying, as we fought towards one another.

He hadn't left me. He'd come for me.

"Minerva!"

His shout sent a wave of healing over my body, soothing the heartache I'd felt at his loss.

"Cazien!" I called back. We were so close.

Torun slid between us, a furious expression twisting his ugly face. "You're more trouble than you've ever been

worth.”

He swung at me and I blocked him with the metal rod. “You shouldn’t have bothered, then,” I sneered out the reply, shoving him back. He had a sword and all I had was this dagger and metal rod. I’d need to get too close to end him. And I really, really wanted to be the one to kill him.

“Darling.”

Cazien was closer now, the endearment hinting at something enough for my gaze to flick towards his voice. The moment I did, a sword—the one with the blue gems that I’d taken from the treasure—was tossed to me. I dropped the metal rod, spinning on my foot to capture the hilt and use the momentum to block the next strike from Torun.

“Thanks!” I shouted to my lover, lashing out at the man who’d killed my family.

“I’m the one who should be grateful,” Cazien said, sounding hardly out of breath. “Have I ever told you how devastatingly sexy you are with a sword?”

“Can you two save it for later?” Gavret snapped at us, and despite fighting with Torun, I grinned.

Fighting with the two of them at my side felt right. It felt like home. Cazien was my home. And he’d come back for me.

I threw myself into the fight with Torun, ignoring everyone else on the deck.

Torun was twice my age, clearly experienced in fighting, especially on the deck of a ship as I pursued him around the mast.

"I should have killed you along with your mother and father," he growled.

"I'm glad you didn't," I barked back, narrowly avoiding a sweeping strike of his blade. He pulled it before the blade could sink into the wooden mast. "Because I've been thinking of killing you for a long time. I'd hate to have that taken from me."

There were more bodies on the deck now, even an entire crew of pirates were no match for the deadliness of two Talon Brothers. Could the entire family best an army? I wouldn't be surprised.

Torun tried to goad me again, but I couldn't react to his words. All I saw, over and over, was him dragging the knife across my father's throat. There was no other space in my thoughts except how to parry and block each of his attacks so I could get closer to landing the killing blow he deserved.

Everything disappeared around me, even Cazien no longer existed.

Torun's sword came slashing down, slower than before—the old man was tiring. I stepped towards him rather than away, letting my shoulder take the weight of his fist as the blow struck. My ribs screamed out in pain, but it was an echo compared to the grim satisfaction coursing through me as I raised the stolen dagger.

Torun's eyes went wide. Time slowed enough that I watched the realization of his death land on him. I reveled in the fury and the denial I beheld in him even as pain lanced through my body. Even as my blood flowed from multiple wounds.

I slammed the blade into his neck, baring my teeth. His warm blood spluttered out, running down my arm as I reached up to fist his hair. I held his head as I drove the dagger deeper, staring into his hate-filled eyes, with thoughts of my mother and father as the blade struck his spine.

I pulled away and Torun swayed, his blade clattering to the deck. We'd made it to the side, and he clung to life and the railing. I stepped up to him once more, pressing my palm flat against his racing, stuttering heartbeat, frantic in its death throes. And when the life winked out of Torun's eyes, when his body began to slump, I pushed him overboard.

I watched his body tumble into the sea below, slapping the dark blue water with the sweetest sound. He slipped under, nothing remarkable about his burial, just as he deserved.

A scream tore the air, and belatedly I realized it was me. Pain shot through my lower back as an arm came around my throat, hauling me back against someone's chest. My legs barely worked as Durnth dragged me to the center of the deck, his blade digging deep into my side.

Cazien and Gavret faced us, ready to fight. It would only take Durnth one more blow, an inch higher and to the right to kill me. Pain fogged my mind, but Durnth's words were clear.

"Give me the relic, and I'll let her live."

## CHAPTER THIRTY



**M**y stomach dropped, the pain at my side vanishing as Durnth's words hit me. I struggled against his grip, ignoring the renewed pain.

"Don't—" I gasped out the word. I gripped Durnth's forearm at my neck, clawing into his skin but it made no difference.

Cazien and Gavret watched us, the bodies of the crew surrounding us on the deck. The volcano rumbled behind us, the waves splashing up onto the deck to mix foamy water with blood.

"Cazien..." Gavret trailed off, staring at the back of his brother's head. Zypher screamed above, and Durnth grunted.

"Don't think to send that bird down, else I'll cut her just the same."

"Do it," Cazien growled at his brother, never taking his eyes off Durnth and me. Gavret whistled, but instead of attacking us, the golden eagle landed on his master's shoulder, tucking his wings in tightly to his sides.

"I knew you Talons were smarter than the average brutes." Durnth dragged me back a step. My head spun, and my tunic clung to my skin. He kept the knife in me, the spot relatively harmless beyond the massive bleeding. If I could manage to stop the bleeding, I'd live.

Cazien's hand went to the giant's eye clipped to his belt.

"Cazien," I hissed out through the pressure at my neck.  
"Don't. Save your brother."

Durnth laughed, a dark and oily sound that made me shudder. "Oh, your brother. She told me you wanted to impress a woman. It makes so much more sense now."

Cazien's eyes met mine, his hand stalling, and I tried to shake my head. He couldn't, not after coming so close to having what they needed to save Viridian.

"Will Gavret let you trade your brother for her? She's nothing but a piece of trash from the street."

"Fuck you," I grit out, trying to kick back against him.

"Ah, ah, ah," he chided me, then tucked his head against mine as if he really cared. "This is why I said not to get your heart involved, girl. You love him. But what has he said this whole time?" He paused as if thinking. "Cazien, remind me what you said."

"Durnth, I'll kill you."

He laughed, the vibrations shaking the knife in my side. "Do you remember, Min? What your dear lover has said on this trip?" He tilted the knife enough to make me cry out.  
"Say it."

I sucked in ragged breaths, the world swimming around me. "That there's nothing he won't do to get the treasure."

Durnth pressed a loud smack against my forehead but I was too weak to recoil. “Exactly. And now we find out how true that is. He’s already traded dozens of lives for his brother. What’s one more?”

Cazien stepped forward, and I shook my head. Tears fell down my face. “Cazien, it’s okay. Don’t give him it. I’ll be fine.”

Durnth snorted. “No, you won’t. If I don’t get that piece of treasure, the only one thing of value from that damn hoard, I’ll gut you in front of him. You know it. And so does he.”

“If I give it to you, you’ll let her go?”

My heart fluttered, like a bird with a broken wing. He couldn’t be considering it. I loved him, and I thought he’d loved me but this was condemning his brother to years in the fae realm—maybe even forever.

“Caz—” Gavret stepped forward, putting his hand on his younger brother’s shoulder. Gavret spared me a look, and I knew what he wanted Cazien to choose. I nodded at him, hoping he saw that I wanted the same thing.

I loved Cazien too much to let him get this far only to fail.

“Tick tock, boys,” Durnth egged them on. “Time waits for no one and she’s losing a lot of blood.”

He was right. Even if Cazien traded the relic for me, there was no guarantee I’d survive. My limbs were heavy, and I clung to Durnth’s forearm to stay upright as much as to free myself.

Cazien jerked free of his brother’s touch, his wrath-filled gaze targeting Durnth.

“I’ll do it.”

My weak protest was lost under my captor's gruff bark of satisfaction.

"Romantic fools," he chided. He pulled the knife free of my side and I screamed, pressing a hand against the wound. Blood coated my hand as it spilled from me. "Set the relic down then get back onto your own boat."

Cazien shook his head, and Gavret glared at Durnth. He hadn't wanted to trade, I hadn't wanted to, but Cazien had. "How do we know you won't kill Minerva regardless?"

"I take offense at that," Durnth drawled, moving us to the opposite side of the deck as their small ship. "I've always been a man of my word."

I couldn't hold back the wet laugh.

"Shut up, girl." He gestured to their ship, actually a boat, more like, with the blade covered in my blood. "Get on your boat and once I know you won't be attacking me, I'll drop her to you. Anything funny"—the blade pressed against my neck—"and I'll cut her throat. It won't take long to bleed her out."

Cazien turned his head over his shoulder, but never took his eyes off of me. "Go, Gavret."

His brother hesitated, but then tossed himself over the rail. I didn't hear a splash, so I had to assume the boat was there.

"Now the relic, Demonbane."

My tears renewed, and I fought against Durnth, cursing my weakness. "Don't, Cazien," I pleaded as his hand went to his belt. "I'm not worth it. Don't do this. Not for me. Let me die here, it's okay."

"Minerva," Cazien growled out my name. "Shut the fuck up."

I shook my head, a small movement considering Durnth's grip on me. "Don't let it be in vain, dammit."

Cazien held the relic out to his side, his other hand reaching for a rope that had been hooked to the rail. He twirled it around his arm three times.

"Give her here and I'll drop it."

"That's not—"

"Dammit, Durnth," Cazien spat out, his eyes darkening. "Do you want the fucking thing or not? You're not throwing her over the fucking side."

Durnth stiffened and I could feel him contemplating it. At this point, I wanted nothing more than to fall to the deck. The pain was lessening, and my legs quaked as I tried to stand.

"Fine."

Durnth marched me forward towards Cazien, who kept his eyes on the man holding me. My feet dragged as I tried to keep up, stumbling over myself.

"Don't do this," I protested weakly, willing Cazien to look at me.

I'd never seen him look this angry without his eyes completely black. But his arm didn't shake as he held the relic out to the side.

"Same time," came Durnth's terse order.

"Fine."

Durnth shoved me forward towards Cazien, and I fell forward, knees buckling. Cazien dropped the relic, his arm gathering me to him.

"Pleasure doing business with you, Talon," Durnth said, backing away, the giant's eye under his arm.

"Rot in hell, Durnth," Cazien growled, his voice rumbling through me where I pressed against him. Cazien bent until his arm was under my bottom and lifted me. Then he was climbing over the railing, easing us down the side of the ship into the smaller boat below.

Hands wrapped around me, taking me from Cazien, and Gavret cradled me in his arms until Cazien was free of the rope. He gave me back to his younger brother and shoved off the ship with an oar.

Cazien settled me in the prow of the boat, using spare canvas as padding.

He lifted my tunic. "Let me see." I pulled away my hand and he grimaced. Reaching behind him, he started to pull items from a sack. I realized it was the same med kit from our travels, or the same style at least.

"You're too pale," he muttered as he tore pieces of bandages into thinner strips before beginning to bind me. I winced as he pulled it tight without apology. "We need to get you to a real healer."

I shook my head. "You shouldn't have made the trade."

Cazien didn't look at me as he stayed crouched near me, looking through the kit. He pulled out a sachet and poured the three dried herb balls into his palm. He picked one and held it to my lips.

"Gavret agrees," I said around his fingers. I spared a look to his brother, whose back was to us as he rowed, his powerful muscles bulging in his back with the movement. I knew he heard me though.

"I couldn't let you die, Min." Cazien was quiet as he packed the med kit back up. "Keep chewing."

The herb ball was pungent and bitter, but I recognized the willow bark. It'd help with the pain. "No whiskey in there?" A weak attempt at humor. His eyes didn't soften.

"No alcohol in your condition."

The sea's waves were restless, the sailboat—easily manned by two people but large enough to handle the open waters—fought against the waves. Cazien leapt up, releasing the sails to give Gavret a break from the oars. I was helpless to do anything other than watch and chew on the pain reliever.

The volcano roared behind me, the blue sky turned hazy with smoke. More splashes surrounded the boat, sending Gavret and Cazien rushing to drop the sail again to protect it from flying debris.

A roar split the air, sending a wave of sound from the island rushing towards us. The sea lifted, the boat almost pushed to standing on its bow. We clung to whatever we could as darkness blotted out the sky above us.

The sound of wood exploding and the ocean howling as it raced away deafened us. We were pelted with shards of wood, rope, and—oh, gods, flesh.

The boat fell back down to the calmer waters, pain making me cry out, water splashing up and over the rails, burning my wounds.

"Fuck."

Gavret and Cazien spoke at the same time, a single word of awe. Forcing myself upright, it was immediately clear why.

Where the ship had been now stood a new pillar of black volcanic rock, the shape of a giant javelin launched through the sky with deadly precision.

The water churned with blood from the corpses, chunks of the ship floating on the surface, but the rest of it was sinking on either side of the new stone pillar.

Cazien made to dive into the water, and Gavret caught him around the middle. “Don’t,” his brother ordered. “It’s lost. I won’t lose you too.”

Cazien wilted against his brother’s side, leaning on him for support.

“And the scavengers have arrived,” Cazien said, sounding defeated.

He was right. Already fins poked through the surface, the massive sharks devouring the dead crew, staining the dark sea a vibrant red. Scanning the bloodied, chaotic waters, I fought back the darkness. I needed to know he wasn’t coming back.

There. Durnth surfaced in the wine red sea, thrashing. The bastard didn’t know how to swim.

Black shapes with silver fins slicing the water circled him. He shouted something, the water splashing over his face and making him sputter. We watched as sharks, no—

“Water wraiths,” Cazien said, with horror and appreciation. A predator recognizing other predators.

The water wraiths, a brutal cousin to mermaids, wrapped their silver-skinned hands around the Hallows leader, and with brutal efficiency—ripped his arms from his body before a final one leapt clear of the turbulent waters,

her mouth opened to reveal rows of wicked teeth, and sunk her teeth into his neck and shoulder, dragging him under.

"Help me get the sails up," Gavret ordered quietly. "Then tend to Minerva."

I drifted from my body as I watched the two of them right the sails once more, the rumbling of the volcano apparently finished. Cazien made his way to me, his face flat as he checked on my bandage and fed me another pain chew.

I tried to ask him why he didn't let me die, why he chose me over his brother, but death reached for me, shutting my eyes and bringing me into the tender hold of the dark.



I KNEW I STILL LIVED BECAUSE EVERY RELIGION PROMISED THAT IN death there was no more pain. And I hurt like a bitch. Unless, I conceded—unable to open my eyes, I'd been sent to suffer in a hell of demons.

Someone held my hand, tracing designs on the back of my hand. It hurt. I might have made a sound, because the movement stopped then disappeared. I cried out then, that anchor disappearing. Something cool eased between my lips, then a bitter, vile liquid filled my mouth.

Choking, I tried to spit it out, but hands held my mouth closed, another other stroking my throat as if to coax me into swallowing. It was swallow or inhale it, so I swallowed the disgusting stuff that coated my throat like thick mud before settling in my stomach like a shovel full of gravel.

The cool object returned to my mouth, and I tried to pull away.

This time, though, it was crisp, clean water and I suckled eagerly.

The heavy sensation spread from my stomach throughout my limbs, dragging me under again. Before I slipped completely away, the hand grasped mine again, a familiar sensation of rough calluses grazing my skin.



THE ROOM WAS BRIGHT ENOUGH, I REGRETTED OPENING MY EYES AT once. I lifted my head, trying to sit up, but I was strapped to whatever I lay on and every part of me felt impossibly heavy. I let my head drop back down, groaning.

Turning to the side, I tried to guess where I was. From the way the room swayed, I'd guess I was on a boat again, but this wasn't one I recognized.

On the other side of me was Cazien, sprawled and slouched in a chair, his hair falling around his face that he'd propped up on his fist. He was fast asleep, and someone had thrown a blanket over him as if he refused to leave.

His face was lined with exhaustion, deep purple shadows under his eyes as if he had refused to sleep. Beside his chair on a table was an open box of what I presumed was the bitter medicine he'd forced down my throat, along with water.

His eyes opened, his awareness seeking me out first thing. His breath hitched, and he leaned forward, the blanket falling from his lap as he brushed my hair back.

"You're awake." He looked me over, as if able to discern my pain level with a glance alone. "How do you feel?"

I swallowed, trying to wet my throat. "Like I tried to swallow a desert?"

"Here." He pulled away, moving to the straps that tied me down. He gave me an apologetic look. "The seas were pretty rough and I didn't want to risk you sliding off the table."

He helped me sit up, his arm sturdy behind my shoulders, and then brought a cup of water to my mouth. I drank greedily, groaning when he pulled it away.

"Don't want you to be sick," he spoke, setting it down. "You can have more in a bit. Pain?"

I groaned. "Everything is sore," I admitted. He swept me into his arms, and I clung to him out of instinct. In moments, we'd crossed the room and he was laying me onto the soft bed. My hair was loose, he must have unbraided it while I was out, and he swept it out from under my head. I couldn't meet his eyes, not when he looked like that.

"Why?"

Cazien didn't need to ask what I meant. He sat on the bed beside me, elbows on his knees as he stared across the room. It was similar to Resuld's, but this room felt less personal. As if it were a grand room one could rent in a city. I strained to hear beyond the walls, and there were only faint murmurings of conversations and the occasional call of a gull.

"When we were entering the labyrinth of caves, and the curse activated the protection charms Corwyn made, I told you it required I give it a truth."

I muttered a groan as I sat up against the headboard. Cazien went and retrieved the glass of water, pouring a fine powder into the cup and swirling it before he gave it to me. With a sniff, I knew it to be willow bark. Nasty, bitter stuff—but it worked.

He took his place beside me again, running his hand back through his long hair. I'd never seen him so disheveled, physically and emotionally. I forced myself to drink the doctored water.

"The magic asked me a question, and I swore I had more time than I should have to contemplate the answer. I knew if I lied, the protection would fail. I had to be honest with myself, and the magic, for it to work."

I reached out to him, but dropped my hand to the bed. He was tense, every piece of him curling in on itself as if to hide from the truth he'd faced.

"It asked me if I had to choose between you and Viridian, who I'd choose." He squeezed his eyes shut, his head falling back. There was pain on his face, striking hot through me even as his words gave me hope. He was quiet, before scrubbing his face.

"You should have chosen him," I whispered, my throat burning with tears I was too dehydrated to shed. "I was just the guide, someone you had a good time with. And now you'll resent—"

He moved too fast. All I could do was squeak and cling to the cup as he held my face and kissed me. It was a kiss of many things. Frustration. Promises. Sorrow. Affection. His lips claimed my own, a fierce demand that soon tempered into something softer.

Cazien rested his head against mine. “I told the magic I would choose you, and I did.” He pressed another kiss to my lips. “And I don’t regret it. Nor will I resent you.”

The cup shook in my hand as I set it to the side and took one of his hands in its place. “But he’s your brother.”

Cazien tilted my chin up, making me meet his eyes. Despite the exhaustion and deep shadows, he was beautiful. “And you’re the woman I love, Minerva.”

I let out a sob, covering my mouth with the back of my hand but it was pointless. I sobbed again, and he gathered me in his arms as I cried, a few tears slipping out to scald my cheeks.

“I thought you left me.” I clung to him. “I saw the ship leave and I thought—” A hiccup interrupted me. He pulled back, brushing my hair with his hand.

“I could never leave you,” he whispered, his words adamant still. His gaze bore into mine. “Resuld wanted to leave because of the volcano. So Gavret and I found another ship to take us all back to Constinbul. I came back to the inn, and you were gone.” His thumb rubbed circles on my cheek. “When you didn’t come back, I knew something was wrong. Gavret and Zypher tracked you to their ship.”

I smiled, my chin wobbled but the sorrow was melting away. “And you came to play Prince Charming? Rescuing the damsel in distress?”

He laughed at that. “You broke yourself out, if I recall correctly. You didn’t need me to rescue you.”

I held his hand with both of mine, studying the tiny slivers of scars there. “I’m glad you did.”

“Me, too.”

I swallowed and raised my eyes. “Is Gavret mad at you for picking me?”

“He was going to knock me out and make the trade if I refused.” There was a fond look in his eyes. “Gavret only came along with me to keep my ass out of trouble. Not that he did that much.”

I snorted, shaking my head. Still, I was glad to know that Gavret wouldn’t resent me for being the one Cazien chose.

“And your brother?”

Cazien sighed before climbing into the bed beside me. It wasn’t as wide as Resuld’s bed was, but I didn’t mind being pulled against him.

“We’ve got more time to figure something out,” he said at last, helping me ease back down on my back. “He’s got a few more years left on the bargain regardless. Even if we can’t get him out early, we can do our best to get him out before the last day of the seventh year.”

“I’ll help,” I swore. “In whatever way I can. You won’t even need to pay me.”

Cazien laughed, and it was light and sweet and everything I needed. He rolled onto his side, pressing his lips to mine.

“We’ve still got a couple days before we dock in Constinbul, but when we do, I’m going to make sure you have absolutely no doubts about my love for you, Minerva.”

My face ached with how broad my smile was. I traced his face with my fingers, taking in every detail, and followed my path with gentle kisses.

“I love you, Cazien,” I murmured before I kissed him.

He pulled back, nuzzling my nose with his. “Of course you do. I’m every woman’s dream.”

I scoffed and reached behind me for the pillow. I smacked him with it before he could block me and giggled.

“You’re the worst.”

“Enough of that, woman.” He snatched the pillow from me, settling it back under my head. “You can’t go around hitting me with pillows. It’ll endear you to my family too much.”

I shifted, groaning at the dull ache. He looked down, as if he could see it through my clean tunic, and gently pressed his hand against it. “The healer couldn’t prevent a scar,” he said, an apology in his eyes.

I bit my lower lip, a languid desire building despite my weary body. “So long as you kiss it better, I don’t mind.”

Cazien’s lip curled into a wicked grin, his hand slipping under my tunic.

“Your wish is my command.”

## EPILOGUE



Two months ago, this hallway led to my home. I still knew what boards creaked and what doors to hurry past in hopes of avoiding their residents. I'd timed my arrival for the morning, knowing the landlord never rose before noon. I didn't bother going to my old room. It'd be rented out again by now, anything of value taken. Instead, I rapped my knuckles against another door, the room quiet beyond. I hoped nothing had happened while I was gone.

The grin on the woman who opened the door sent relief through my veins.

"Look who's returned," Jenny said in greeting. She opened the door wider, welcoming me inside. "Unless you're an imposter. I don't think I've ever seen you in such nice clothes. The job must have gone well then? Come on, the twins are still sleeping."

Her single room was larger than mine had been, a partition of scrap fabric dividing the space for the twin toddlers. I gladly accepted a cracked mug of coffee,

inhaling the spiced beverage with pleasure. Mint tea was refreshing, but Constinbul's spicey dark coffee was a treat.

"I take it you found my gift?"

She glared at me over the top of her own mug. "I should be mad at the charity." She looked towards the corner where her children slept and back to me. "Thank you."

I smiled and reached out to her. She took my hand, squeezing it. Her gaze went to the gold clip pinning my hair back, and then to the simple gold band on my finger. A ferocious grin spread on both of us as she held up my hand accusingly. "You're married?" she hissed, but there was only joyous curiosity in her voice. "Tell me everything!"

So I told her, well almost everything. I skipped over the strange magic that had taken over Durnth and the witch's charms that protected Cazien and myself from the curse. I told her about falling for the man who'd paid me to guide him, fighting at his side against beastly half-fae, being kidnapped by the same people who'd brought me to this city a decade ago and how the man I'd fallen in love with came back to rescue me.

Jenny listened, enraptured, her chin propped up on her hand and her coffee forgotten.

"So, after I woke up on the ship and we knew I wasn't about to die, he hauled the captain into the room, along with his brother and one bewildered passenger, and we were married."

I grinned down at the simple ring on my finger. The first place Cazien had taken me was to a jeweler, declaring I could choose whatever ring I wanted—even if it was with a diamond large enough to drag me to the bottom of the sea.

I thought the jeweler was more disappointed than Cazien when I picked out the simple gold band.

"I never thought I'd be so excited to marry," I confessed, and Jenny smiled sympathetically. Her own husband had died before the twins were born, but from what she'd told me, they'd been better off without him.

"When do I get to meet him? And what's his name? He must be gorgeous if he captured your elusive heart."

I chewed on my lips, spinning the ring around my finger. Steeling myself, I met her gaze. "There's another reason I came here," I started, and she raised an eyebrow. "His brother is a duke"—her other eyebrow shot up—"and their family is quite wealthy. So, it seems I'll need a lady's maid."

Jenny gasped, her hand going to her throat. "I can't be a lady's maid," she protested. "I don't know—"

I snatched her hand in mine again. "I don't give a shit about what you know or don't," I interrupted. "You are my friend, and I can trust you. That's more important to me than your needlework." I nodded pointedly towards the sleeping children. "And they'll be able to live with the other children on the estate. The duke has continued his mother's insistence that all those in his employ and their children have access to education."

Jenny's eyes lined with silver as she looked towards the patchwork curtain. Her hand shook in mine.

"Come with me, Jenny," I whispered. "Let's leave this damn neighborhood behind."

"And your husband?" Her look held a multitude of questions.

"He's a good man, despite what they say," I assured her. "He'd never force himself on you. And if he strays from me, you know I'd cut off his balls—and he knows it too."

She laughed, her hand covering her mouth to stifle the sound.

I steeled myself. "My husband is Cazien Talon."

Her laughter stopped, her eyes going wide with shock.

"Cazien Talon?" she repeated in a hiss. And I nodded, holding her gaze. She straightened. "And you're happy, truly?"

I nodded, pressing my lips together to stifle my chin from wobbling. "I really am." She sighed and looked back towards the corner. "Well, it's not as if they'd grow up in peace on these streets."

Hope filled me. "So, you'll come? You'll accept the position?"

Jenny grinned. "Well, I can't let you have all of the adventures. And who knows, maybe there will be a handsome footman looking for a wife." She eyed me up and down. "I'll say it'll be interesting to see you in dresses."

I laughed, loud enough the twins began to stir. Standing, I hugged her tightly. "We'll find you a handsome footman. I promise."

I stayed listening to all the gossip Jenny had discovered during the weeks I was gone. Peace settled over my shoulders as I watched the woman speak, occasionally looking over to where her twins napped. I'd never cared for the gossip of the neighborhood before, but now that we were about to leave, I realized how many people had infiltrated my life despite not allowing anyone to get close.

I helped her pack, the twins only having a few sets of clothing and favored toys. When Jenny eyed them despondently, I squeezed her shoulder. For everything she's done and would do for me, I'd outfit them both with no expenses held. For herself, she packed her two best dresses and chemises and her sturdiest pair of canvas shoes.

Jenny had a kind soul, despite the hardships she'd faced as a single mother, and I found myself eager to spoil her with silks and linens.

As she was rousing the twins, three raps came at the door and I hurried to open it. Cazien stood there, glaring at someone down the hall but the moment he turned his face to me, his eyes softened. He'd never look soft, not outside the privacy of chambers where I was the only one to see him take off the mantle of Demonbane.

"I take it she's agreed?"

I moved aside with a nod, opening the door farther.

Cazien dominated the small room, but to Jenny's credit, she didn't let him intimidate her. She offered a polite smile, urging her children to greet him.

Davis, the youngest, as his sister Tawny liked to remind everyone, eyed the brown sack in Cazien's hand and sniffed pointedly. "Did you go to Ms. Bronwyn's?"

From the cinnamon and roasted almond scent, I knew he had visited the popular bakery at the corner.

"I did," he said, crouching down so he was eye level with the kids. He held out the packet of sweets. "Min told me Ms. Bronwyn's cinnamon almonds are the best. So, since we're all about to go on a trip, I thought you and your sister might want a treat."

Tawny and Davis looked up in question, Tawny's little hands fisting her dress as if she had to hold herself back from snatching them from him, massive man or no. The moment Jenny nodded, Tawny's hand shot out like a viper and Cazien laughed as they both ripped into the bag, shoving an entire handful of roasted almonds into their mouths.

"Manners," Jenny chided them. "Say thank you to Lord Cazien."

The two children said something that sounded like that, but it was impossible to tell since they'd stuffed their mouths like chipmunks.

Cazien ruffled Davis's hair, a soft enough look on his face that I wondered if he wanted his own children. I'd never wanted them when I thought I'd be consigned to living as a Hallows for life. But now, with Cazien as my husband?

Once Viridian was free, maybe it was something we could consider.

How terrifying... and exciting.

Cazien rose, and I pouted. "You didn't get any for me?"

His dark brows snapped together in a frown as he pulled out another packet from his belt pouch. He stepped close, dropping a kiss to my forehead as he handed them to me. "I'd never be so cruel as to deny you sweets."

I opened the packet with only a bit more manners than the twins, but it was close enough that both Cazien and Jenny laughed. I stuck my tongue out at both before shoving another almond in my mouth.

"Now." Cazien turned to the children, who stilled and watched him with less wariness. Sweet treats made fast

friendships. "Are either of you afraid of horses?" When they shook their heads, he nodded decisively. "Then I have a very important job for the both of you. Nixus is my horse, and she looks scary, but she's as fond of sugar as you two are. Do you think you two could be brave enough to be her friends and take care of her as we travel?"

Tawny nodded eagerly, but Davis looked hesitant.

"We don't know how," he said. His lower lip gave the slightest tremble at the confession, as if Cazien would take back the offer.

"I'll teach you," Cazien promised, and I fell a little bit more in love with him as he clasped the little boy's shoulder. From the shining in Jenny's eyes, I thought she might have as well.

How this man could ever think himself a monster was beyond me.

As if he was aware of how watery eyed he was making both Jenny and me, he righted himself, slipping back on the mask of indifference.

"Are we ready to leave? Gavret is anxious to get going. He's heard word from Lord Carrington, and fuck if I know why he's in a rush to go see that bastard after what happened."

I snorted, not believing this cool mask in the least. I slipped my arm through his and held my hand out to Tawny. She grasped it, her hand sticky with sugar, but mine was too.

"Adventure awaits," I said, my cheeks aching from my smile.

Cazien's blue eyes met mine, open adoration in them despite his stoic look. He leaned over, pressing another kiss to my hair. "Yes, it does, darling."



Interested in a second steamy epilogue from Cazien's point of view, where he finally gets his bandolier fantasy? Then click here!



The story of the Talon family continues with Gavret in book two, The Hunter. Get it now!



Or keep reading for a peak at the first chapter!

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As an author, sometimes I feel like the book is the easiest part to write. Blurbs are terrible, but even harder are acknowledgements. How are we supposed to convey all our thanks to all the people who've helped make our books what they are? And what if we forget someone?! That's always awkward.

But I'll do my best here.

First, thank you to my betas: Renee, Gina, and Crystal. These ladies get the book in its ugliest draft and help iron out the wrinkles and tell me when I'm headed in the wrong direction.

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I'm sure I've missed someone, and I swear it isn't personal! I've just got a terrible memory and it's just who I am at this point, ha.

At last, my thanks go to you, reader. Because without you picking up my books, I'd never have been able to succeed at

my dream career.

All my love,  
Marie Robinson

THE HUNTER

THE DARK TALONS BOOK TWO



***The Talon warrior who broke my heart is now the only chance at saving my people.***

I fell in love with Gavret “The Hunter” Talon almost ten years ago. That foolishness cost me our friendship and estranged Gavret from my guardian, Lord Carrington, turning them into spiteful enemies.

Gavret is older, harder, and the years have scared him, body and soul. And now he's returned after my guardian is found dead to protect me and seek justice.

I thought I'd banished my feelings when my heart broke. But the longer we work together, the harder it is to lie. I'm still in love with Gavret and he'll never love me back.

When our heated fights turn into heated embraces, it's all I can do to protect my heart. There was never anyone else for me, even when I let him think otherwise.

Together, Gavret and I must hunt down this ancient evil before it can destroy the kingdom. I need to master my heart and my new-found magic before it's too late.

Because I can't survive Gavret shattering my heart again.

## CHAPTER ONE



The death of my guardian was not what I needed this morning.

Lord Carrington lay in his bed, the room undisturbed, and yet his face had been frozen into a look of horror. His neck showed the signs of strangulation, but I hadn't ventured close enough to see if there was any sign of what was used.

I sank onto the chair near his breakfast table, a servant rushing to my side. I waved her away.

"Go—" I stopped. Where would I send her? I was the highest-ranking person at the estate. Lord Carrington's closest male relative a distant cousin a week's ride away. I smoothed down my dress, a too bright lavender for the occasion. I supposed I'd be switching to mourning clothes. "Fetch me my writing desk, please. I must let Lord Carrington's solicitor and relatives know of his death."

The woman bobbed a quick curtsey, leaving me alone with the man who'd been my guardian since I was ten years old.

Lord Carrington—recently granted the title and accolades of Viscount by royal decree—a widower with no sons to inherit his title and fortune. A famed warrior in his own right, fighting alongside his men even into his fifties.

My father.

I dropped my head into my hands, breathing through my nose. Grief threatened to overwhelm me, but I couldn't let it. Not when the household looked to me for direction. Everyone at the estate knew, and no doubt many of my father's peers were aware, his ward was his bastard daughter. By the time I was sixteen, there was no doubt of our similarities in appearance.

And I loved him more than I'd ever loved my mother. The witch who abandoned me to him when I showed no signs of inheriting her magic.

I was Taryn Riverpine, the half-witch bastard and ward of Viscount Lorzen Carrington. Now, for all that mattered, an orphan who could only hope that Carrington's closest male relative would take pity on me.

As long as the man didn't accuse me of murder. Because my father's death had been no natural thing. With my witch blood, relative or no, affection or no, even the most loyal of servants may be wondering what role I had to play in the lord's death.

I stood, smoothing down my gown and squaring my shoulders. He'd taught me to be strong in the face of adversity, and I would lead his estate until I was relieved of the duty.

Later. I would mourn him later.

A guard had been stationed outside of his room, and the older man nodded to me respectfully. There was no suspicion in his eyes yet. How soon would it appear when the manner of death was revealed.

"Please do not allow anyone in the room without me until I've called for the doctor."

"Yes, Miss Riverpine."

Shouting rose from below—both voices recognizable. Frowning, I hurried down to the foyer where the butler, Mr. Smarth was trying to detain an irritated man.

The goddess Sylva must've been laughing at me right now, to send this particular man to my home today of all days.

"Please stop harassing the staff, Gavret," I snapped, rushing down the stairs.

"Miss Riverpine, I apologize—"

I held up my hand, interrupting the butler "Don't apologize, Mr. Smarth. This man has never done so in his life, and so I doubt he appreciates you doing so on his behalf."

Gavret Talon turned his glare onto me, his arms folded across his chest. Even now, my heart flipped at the sight of him. I shoved any of those thoughts back in the deep dark well they belonged. Gavret made it clear years ago that he cared nothing for my childhood infatuation.

It lingered though—the wild beauty of the man in front of me had only honed him into the perfect weapon against my heart. Why Sylva would antagonize my heart with a man of snarls and claws was beyond me.

I forced myself to meet his cold blue eyes, schooling my face into the blank expression I knew infuriated him. Gavret would never be like his younger brother, Cazien—who the gods had carved from marble. No, Gavret was blessed by the god of the wild hunt, and he would never be able to hide the savagery within him.

“What brings you to the estate, Gavret?” I clasped my hands, hoping he didn’t notice the quiver. At least in a gown he wouldn’t see my legs struggling to keep me upright. First the murder of my father and now Gavret. He’d once been one of Lord Carrington’s greatest friends, treating him as a son. Gavret spent months here, hunting and fighting at my father’s side.

Until I ruined it and drove a wedge between them.

Gavret held up a letter, the Carrington seal clear in blue wax. “Carrington demanded my presence, Taryn.”

His voice was harsh yet filled with smoke and snarls. When I’d first met him, we were both children, but even then he reminded me of one of the shadow leopards which had roamed the mountains around my mother’s coven.

“Smarth refused to notify him of my arrival,” Gavret continued.

I studied him, taking in the signs of travel on his clothing. The Talon estate was two days away, so he’d had to have come from much farther distance.

It would buy me the time I needed.

“I’ll have a room prepared for you,” I said, turning to head down a hall deeper into the manner. “You’ll wish to change, no doubt. Does your eagle still travel with you?”

"He's hunting." Gavret hadn't followed, and I turned back to him. His arms were still crossed. With the simmering demand in his eyes, I was surprised he'd yet to pull the bow from his back and use force to back up his demands.

"I don't need a damned room," he ground out. "I need to see your damned guardian and then get the hell back home. I've got more pressing business to attend than to be at the beck and call of Viscount Carrington."

Maybe it was the way he sneered my father's newly granted title. Maybe it was the memory of how he'd snapped at me, rejecting my childish infatuation. Or maybe it was because I knew my days at the estate were limited.

I turned on my slippers heel and stormed up to him. Gods, I hated how he towered over me. I didn't even come up to his shoulders. I refused to let him intimidate me any longer, or let my damned lingering attraction throw me off. I crossed my arms, uncaring of how they pushed up my breasts, and matched him glare for glare.

"You want to see my guardian that badly, hunter?"

He didn't flinch at my tone, but a servant walking by hurried their steps. I'd inherited my witch mother's temper.

He tilted his head down, exaggerating the movement to remind me just how much smaller I was. I refused to balk, though I wish I had my mother's magic so I could throw this man on his ass. But if I'd had her magic, I'd never have been left here.

"Seeing as he was the one who demanded I come, I'm surprised he isn't already turning you over his knee and

spanking you like the child you are for delaying me, witchling.”

Once. That had happened once, and he never failed to bring it up when we sparred.

I raised my chin. “Fine. Follow me then.” I bent in an exaggerated bow, throwing my hand out towards the stairs.

He strode past me and his scent of loam and cedar assaulted me, my stomach flipping. I resolved to breathe through my mouth as I pushed ahead of him.

He followed me in terse silence as I marched towards my father’s bedroom. If he noticed we weren’t headed towards the study, Gavret said nothing. I nodded to the guard outside, his eyes going wide at Gavret’s presence.

I smiled sweetly. “Gavret Talon is here to see Lord Carrington.”

The guard shifted his gaze to me, a question in his eyes. But I gripped the door handle and opened it, gesturing for the man beside me to go ahead.

Gavret frowned but stepped around me and into the room.

He halted and I knew the moment he noticed Carrington in bed. His shoulders tensed and he shifted into a defensive stance as he took in the entire room before turning to me. I closed the door and leaned against it, crossing my arms.

“What the fuck, Taryn?”

Too tired to keep up the anger any longer, I wilted. My defiant posture softened until I no longer crossed my arms but hugged myself instead. I didn’t look at Gavret as I spoke.

"His footman found him this morning when he wasn't waiting for his breakfast." My voice had lost any edge. Despite our history, Gavret and I had been something close to friends. "I have no idea who would have killed him."

His stare bored into me, but I didn't meet his eyes. If I did, I'd do something embarrassing like throw myself at him and cry. Then I'd have to deal with his rejection on top of my father's death. Gavret moved towards the bed, closer than I'd been able to. With steady hands, he pulled the sheet back from the man's chin and his hiss had me stepping towards him.

"What? What is it?"

I stood to the side of him, but like a coward, kept him between myself and the dead man. Gavret's sheer size was now a wall, shielding me from the worst of my grief.

"There were no signs of break-in? Any guests?"

I shook my head. "None. Lord Tannery was the last to visit and that was over a month ago. It's just been us."

He pulled a thin dagger from his belt, using the tip to spread the tunic open. "Do you recognize these symbols?"

I pressed closer, against the bulk of him and his arm, narrowly avoiding touching the massive bow slung on his back.

"Runes," I whispered. Gavret looked at me, and I shook my head. "I can't read them. They're none my mother taught me before—"

"Could she have done it?"

I opened my mouth to object but closed it. I stared at the multitude of red lines across Carrington's neck and the runes burned into the bloodless flesh under. "As far as I

know, she hasn't been here since the day she left me in his care. He's always treated me well—" I swallowed hard, closing my eyes against the tears.

He'd treated me more than well. Carrington may not have officially recognized me as his daughter, but he'd been a father to me in every other way. "If it was her, I don't know why she would have done it." I stepped back, needing space between both my father and Gavret. "I don't know why anyone would have done it."

Gavret pulled the sheet back to his chin, sheathing his blade before turning to me.

I spoke before he could. "Why did my—Lord Carrington send for you?"

He gripped the letter, the parchment crinkling in the silence between us. He took in the room again, his eyes seeming to penetrate every shadow defying the morning sunlight.

"We should speak somewhere else."

I waited until Gavret met my eyes. His expression was as shuttered as it could be, and dammit, that tug of force between us reared up in my chest. "Follow me." I left without waiting for a response, nodding again to the guard.

I led us down the stairs once more and out into the gardens. The moment I stepped outside, Mr. Smarth approached.

"The healer is on his way, Miss Riverpine," he said with a nod of respect before turning his glare on the man behind me. It might have been petty, but I appreciated how the staff had taken my side five years ago and how it was clear

they still did. “The solicitor has been sent for as well. Perhaps it is not the best time to be receiving visitors?”

I could *feel* Gavret bristle behind me as I pressed my lips into a thin smile. “Thank you, Mr. Smarth. Despite the current situation, I believe Gavret may be staying the night before returning home. Please see to it a room is prepared and have refreshments brought to the garden.”

Mr. Smarth bowed, departing with another warning glare at Gavret. To Gavret’s credit, he said nothing as we walked father into the garden that had once been Lady Carrington’s pride.

Gavret pulled out the iron chair at the table for me, and I sat with a smirk.

“It’s good to know you can still dredge up the manners befitting your station.”

Gavret removed the bow and quiver, leaning them against the ornate garden table before slouching in the twin of my own chair. “I am being reminded why I shouldn’t bother.”

I rolled my eyes, then looked upwards at the familiar call of Zypher. A moment later and the golden eagle glided above the hedges towards us. The creature had stolen my breath the first time I’d seen him in flight, and continued to do so every time. The bird’s wing clipped the back of Gavret’s head as he passed before settling on the back of my own chair.

We both ignored Gavret’s muttered curses as I greeted the eagle with a curled knuckle.

“The training isn’t going well with him is it?” I asked the eagle, who leaned eagerly into my scratches before giving

me a long-suffering look that pulled a quiet laugh from me. “If you ever tire of the brute, you will always be welcome here, Lord Zypher.”

“If you’re done trying to steal him from me?”

The eagle hopped, avoiding hitting me with a wing as he moved to sit behind Gavret. I could have sworn the bird winked at me before he began to preen.

I settled back into the chair, hands on my lap, and let the cool mask of indifference slip over my face again. “So. Lord Carrington sent for you?”

“How are you?” he asked instead.

I was saved from immediately responding by another servant setting out a tea service. I thanked them before pouring myself a cup of tea and, at his sharp nod, a cup for Gavret. “Do you still take honey?” I asked while adding a drop of it into the steaming amber drink before pushing the saucer towards him.

“I do.” His voice had softened and I busied myself selecting two of the pastries made for breakfast not more than an hour ago. “Taryn?”

“What,” I snapped, slamming my tea cup down hard enough to rattle the plate. Even Zypher startled.

Gavret’s expression wasn’t soft, but the irritation had fled. I kept my chin raised.

“You didn’t answer me.”

“Nor you, me.”

He sighed loudly through his nose before leaning forward, bracing his hands on the table between us.

“Your father died this morning,” he stated as if I needed a reminder. I bit the inside of my lips to distract from the

grief. I mirrored his position, dredging up every ounce of the cold heart I'd inherited from the Riverpine witches.

"You made it very clear five years ago that you didn't care if he was my father. So don't bother acting as if you care now." My knuckles were white against the garden table. "My *guardian* has been killed and soon I will be forced from the only home I've had. Now, if you do not plan to tell me what business you had with the viscount, I will take my leave and attend to the necessities of circumstance."

Something I might have called regret if it had been anyone else flashed in his eyes before his mouth narrowed and his brows pinched. He retrieved the letter, the blue wax seal broken, and tossed it next to my plate.

"It seems the *viscount* believed your life in danger, Miss Riverpine."

*Continue Gavret and Taryn's story in The Hunter on Amazon.*

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Marie Robinson has worn many hats in the publishing industry, both traditional and independent. She began to write the stories of her heart in 2017, with her literary holy trinity is fantasy, romance, and adventure. She has been featured on multiple podcasts and presented at writing conferences. In 2019, she became a co-founding member of Harbinger Press, all while continuing to write the stories that keep her up at night.

She credits the works of Kate Elliot, Mary Robinette Kowal, Mercedes Lackey, Tamora Pierce, and Brandon Sanderson as influences of her love of reading and her own stories.

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